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CONSTRUCTING THE IDENTITY OF A NATION:
THE TOURIST GAZE AT THE MUSEUM OF SCOTLAND

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In an era of global instability and crises of national identity, the role of heritage tourism in creating images of national identity has become an important area for research. This article considers the role of heritage tourism in constructing national identity in the nation of Scotland through the lens of the Museum of Scotland. It describes the findings of qualitative research undertaken with potential and actual target consumers to the Museum of Scotland. Three research questions were addressed: Does the Museum of Scotland construct (1) a vision of a ‘new’ Scotland? (2) a symbol of a ‘real’ Scotland? (3) a collective identity of Scotland? The findings suggest that heritage visitors actively identify through their gaze, constructing multifarious meanings of national identity that are dynamic rather than static.

Heritage tourism; National identity; Museums; Consumption; Image

Introduction

The role of heritage tourism in constructing national identities has recently become the focus of a number of commentators (Ashworth, 1994; McCrone, Morris, & Kiely, 1995; O’Connor, 1993; Palmer, 1999). It reflects a wider contemporary pre-occupation with national identity in an increasingly fragmented and destabilized world order. This global crisis of identity (Mercer, 1990) is manifested in a number of ways. The political upheavals in Eastern Europe and the break-up of the USSR have led to a “search for lost identities” (Woodward, 1997, p. 17) with the reconstruction of a number of “nations.” This fragmentation is also discernible in postcolonial Europe and North America, where previously marginalized ethnic groups are reasserting their identities. In Western Europe, where the European Community is asserting a “European identity,” a number of regionalist and nationalist movements have come to the fore.

Amidst this national identity melting pot lies the relative stability and symbolism of a nation’s heritage. Indeed, it has been argued that the recent popularity of heritage is a response to the national identity crises, acting as a counterbalance to its instability.

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(Sols, 1986). Heritage offers representations of a nation’s past with which the individuals within that nation may identify (McLean, 1998). It offers a collective memory of where we come from and hence who we are today, although visions of national identity and history are always contested. At the same time, “the way in which we see ourselves is substantially determined by the way in which we are seen by others” (O’Connor, 1993, p. 68). The representation of our heritage, then, is created not only by ourselves but by those “others” who are also consuming the heritage representation.

National museums, in particular, manifest the nation, where they “assume a quite particular symbolism and meaning for the nation” (Proslor, 1996, p. 35). It has been argued that the creation of national museums tends to coincide with surges of nationalism and a sense of national identity (Gellner, 1996; Kaplan, 1994). In the 19th century museums such as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London were created, formed from the Great Exhibition of 1851 that paraded the wares of the British Empire with pride. It is perhaps no coincidence then, that during the contemporary instability of nations a number of new national museums have been created, in for example, Australia, New Zealand, and Scotland. The national museum, then, represents the nation in time and space, embodying the legitimacy of the heritage of the nation for both citizens and the “other.”

The museum then is a symbol that actively constructs nationhood. As Macdonald (1996) argues, “It is because museums have a formative as well as a reflective role in social relations that they are potentially of such influence” (p. 4). While political institutions shape a nation’s constitutional destiny, national museums shape that nation’s cultural identity. The shaping of that identity is influenced both by the collective myths of the nation (Smith, 1991) and the emotions of nostalgia that the visitor brings to the museum (Belk, 1990).

The aim of this article is to consider the role of museums in creating national identity. The unit of analysis is the nation of Scotland through the lens of the Museum of Scotland, which opened in 1998. The logo for the new Museum of Scotland states its purpose, to “Present Scotland to the World.” The collection for the museum was selected according to how it would contribute to “a coherent display of material illuminating Scottish culture and history” (Museums Advisory Board Report to the Secretary of State, quoted in McKeen, 2000, p. 42). That is, the museum is a discursive site where the narratives of Scotland can be told.

The article is structured as follows. First the concept of national identity is considered and its salience in the nation of Scotland discussed. The representation of the nation is the subject of the next section, through the sharing of a common history or myths, with particular emphasis given to myth making in Scotland. Because heritage is valued through the emotion of nostalgia, the concepts of individual and collective nostalgia are then examined. From this discussion of the literature three research questions are generated: Does the Museum of Scotland construct (1) a vision of a “new” Scotland? (2) a symbol of a “real” Scotland? (3) a collective identity of Scotland? The research that was conducted to address these questions is then outlined. The findings to each question are then discussed in detail, followed by some tentative conclusions.

National Identity and the Nation of Scotland

Anderson (1983) conceptualized the nation as an “imagined community,” where different national identities are imagined in different ways. Difference is often expressed in terms of a dualism, through the “other,” where certain groups of people will be included and excluded (Saussure, 1960). Thus, identity is relational, difference being symbolically marked in relation to others (e.g., male/female, English/Scottish). Difference manifests itself through representational systems, which symbolically mark the self in relation to others. For example, national identity is often actively affirmed by the banal symbolism of the signifiers of identity, such as the national flag (Billig, 1995). This dualism in identity formation involves an unequal opposition, where, according to Derrida (1976), there is a necessary imbalance of power between the two terms. In the case of Scotland, the imagined community has marked boundaries, a geographical space bounded by the border with England. England, though, has historically been the dominant partner since the signing of the Treaty of Union in 1707, which merged the English and Scottish Parliaments. Within this Union, England has dominated politically, although
as Paterson (1994) has pointed out, Scotland enjoyed a distinctive level of autonomy within the United Kingdom civic society, retaining control over the Church, education, and the law. Moreover, as Colley (1992) has suggested, the national identities of England, Scotland, and Wales did not cease to exist, but were overlaid by a British "state" identity. The nationalist movements of the 19th century appeared to hold little interest for the Scots, who were heavily involved in pursuing the Empire-building advantages of the British state. Thus, according to Samuel (1998), a dual identity rested easily where the economic advantages clearly benefited the Scottish nation. It was not until the 20th century and in particular the 1970s that sections of the Scottish population started to demand a greater degree of devolution of government, if not outright independence (Nairn, 1977). The political dominance of England came to a head in the 1980s and 1990s when Scotland was effectively ruled by a New Right government that it had continually rejected in General Elections. The election of a Labour government in 1997 provided the opportunity for constitutional change in Scotland. The referendum late that year voted overwhelmingly for a Scottish Parliament, which reconvened for the first time since 1707 in 1999.

The political momentum for change can be paralleled with the creation of the Museum of Scotland. Although the Museum of Scotland has a long and contentious history dating from the beginning of the 20th century, the decision to build was made in 1992. The timing of the opening was culturally and politically symbolic, taking place on St Andrew's Day, the patron saint of Scotland's day, while falling between the devolution referendum for the reinstatement of the Scottish Parliament and the opening of that Parliament. To many at that time the Museum was seen as "a focus for the kind of energy which has given Scotland back its Parliament" (MacMillan 2000, p. 112). This leads to the question, "Does the Museum of Scotland construct a vision of a new Scotland?"

Myths and the Shaping of the Scottish Nation

Smith (1991) suggests that the modern nation has been made through what he calls "ethnic," that is, the set of myths, symbols, and cultural practices, where the nation is shaped by a common myth, a sharing of a common history, and way of life. As Barthes (1973) claims, myths act as a language, as "a mode of signification" (p. 117). By studying these signs we can begin to interpret how meaning is conveyed in tourism (MacCannell, 1974). As Palmer (1999) has argued, such signs "transmit very particular messages about a nation, its culture" (p. 316). Myths are potent forces in contemporary lives, being constantly reworked to make sense of memories and lives (Samuel & Thompson, 1990). Domestic tourists use these markers to make the connection between themselves and the nation, while overseas tourists see them as distinctive markers of the nation (Launfant, 1995).

The symbols and myths of Scotland, which have international resonance and have been adopted by the Scottish Tourist Board to attract visitors to Scotland, belong to a Highland Scotland that were appropriated in the 18th century as evidence of a distinctive culture. This iconography consists typically of tartan, whisky, castles, Bonnie Prince Charlie and Culloden, Highland mountain scenery, and the "Braveheart" factor of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce. According to Womanek (1987), "all Scots wear tartan, are devoted to bagpipe music, and are moved by the spirit of chivalry... all these fishes live on as items in the Scottish tourist package of the Twentieth century" (p. 25). This cultural distinction rests on a Celtic or Gaelic definition in contrast to Anglo-Saxon England (Chapman, 1992), an invention of tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) to perpetuate the sentimental appeal of Scotland. This romantic dreamscape of Scotland (Edensor, 2002) retains its Highland resonance at the expense of other markers within Scottish society, particularly more contemporary readings offered by the new Scottish literary tradition founded by authors such as Irvine Welsh and James Kelman. The identity of Scotland is portrayed as static, unchanging, its origins buried deep in the mists of time. Recent research in Wales, which is also an oppositional "other" of England, has suggested that this type of dominant tourism discourse is being challenged. Thus, "the meaning and representation of Wales as a tourism space is shifting and its identity is contested as a consequence of changing socio-cultural discourses and of struggles among and between its marketers (the mediators) and its consumers" (Pritchard & Morgan, 2001, p. 181).
Museums have the potential to challenge this myth making, particularly when there is controversy over the representations of the nation, where the heritage is contested, as in Scotland (Dicks, 2000). A decision was made at an early stage of the creation of the Museum to challenge the “myths” of Scotland and instead to represent the “real” history of the Scottish people. The Museum of Scotland employs traditional museological techniques, whereby the majority of the 10,000 artefacts are housed in glass cases and are contextualized by illustration and text. The Museum represents Scotland both chronologically and thematically. Ascending the Museum the visitor passes through time, from the “Early People” archaeological displays and the geological gallery in the basement, up through key periods of Scottish history, to the 20th century gallery at the top of the Museum. The intervening floors narrate specific historical periods and contain exhibitions dealing with “The Kingdom of the Scots,” which displays artefacts related to the emergence of Scotland as a nation, and “Scotland Transformed,” which takes the story from the Act of Union in 1707 to the 19th century. “Industry and Empire” is located on levels four and five and contains exhibitions on the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Contained within this broad chronology are specific themes, such as religion, which run throughout the Museum.

The Museum is almost devoid of iconographic paraphernalia. The one exception is a glass case, “Images and Realities,” which confronts the popular iconography in an amusing manner. It features tartan, gingham, sporrans, and quirky figurines, the rest of the Museum having been designed to explore the “real” history of the Scottish people. This then leads to the question, “Does the Museum of Scotland construct a symbol of a ‘real’ Scotland?”

Searching for Identity: Individual and Collective Nostalgia

On an individual level, nostalgia motivates people to visit heritage sites, be they citizens or tourists. Rapid modernization and the concomitant destruction of the past have deepened nostalgia for the simpler and safer life of former times. Nostalgia becomes a search for roots and historical identity (Lowenthal, 1979), where people ascribe meaning to their environment. Individual identity, then, is located in the process of identification (Hall & du Gay, 1996). It is argued that museum visitors, then, bring their own interpretative lens to museum displays and take their own readings, sometimes in an active way. Visitors bring their own preconceptions to the museum, which shape the nature and perceptions of their visit (Macdonald, 1992). The museum offers the visitor “a heritage with which we continually interact, one which fuses past with present” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 410). Visitors give a multiplex of meanings to museum objects, meanings that are representative of their identities.

At the same time, the nation represents itself as an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) in the museum space (Prosler, 1996). Heritage is valued and conserved by these imagined communities through the emotions of collective nostalgia (Belk, 1990). Highly symbolic objects are publicly shared to denote a socially familiar character. Thus, “The museum takes on the form of a complete microcosmic representation of the sovereign nation state. The collected objects in the museum document a human community extending in time and space: the nation” (Prosler, 1996, p. 35).

A number of commentators have argued that nostalgia has been deployed to legitimate the power of the nation (Naim, 1988; Samuel, 1998; Wright, 1985). Through nostalgia, heritage is offered as a politically neutral dreamscape that papers over dissent and conflict (Dicks, 2000). This would suggest that national museums offer a collective nostalgia. Their representation of a nation offers a one-dimensional static narrative of the nation. The question then is, “Does the Museum of Scotland construct a collective identity of Scotland?”

The Research

The findings reported here form part of a wider research project investigating the construction of national identity in the Museum of Scotland. The qualitative research paradigm was utilized to answer the research questions addressed in this article. It was felt that semistructured in-depth interviews would be the most appropriate data capture tool given that issues of identity are extremely personal, and it would not be possible to elicit such personal data utilizing quantitative questionnaires. The interviews were conducted with museum consumers on two
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separate occasions to allow for a time sequential analysis. The first set of interviews was undertaken in summer 1997 before the opening of the Museum of Scotland with its projected target audience, that is: local visitors from Edinburgh; day and short-break visitors from the rest of Scotland; visitors from the rest of the UK; and overseas tourists, including the Scottish diaspora. This research was undertaken in the Royal Museum of Scotland, which is adjacent to the new Museum building. The second set of interviews took place after the opening of the Museum of Scotland in the Museum itself, in spring 1999, with a similar profile of audience. The intention was to ascertain if the Museum of Scotland did in fact change people’s constructions of the national identity of Scotland.

Overall 172 interviews were undertaken across the two time periods, 89 in 1997 and 83 in 1999, each lasting 10–30 minutes. In each set of interviews about half were conducted with Scottish citizens and the other half were split between those from the rest of the UK and overseas. The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and subsequently analyzed using the techniques of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, extracts were initially tagged and then linked where they related to a specific theme. At each stage of the analysis the output from these procedures was reviewed by the authors. This was to ensure that the interpretation of the data was agreed upon. Notwithstanding the usual limitations of conducting qualitative research, it became apparent that issues of identity are extremely difficult to gauge through the tool of an in-depth interview. Thus, although the findings of the research are of significance, they are tempered with caution. Further work would need to be conducted on other case studies using alternative methods, possibly ethnographic fieldwork, to substantiate the tentative claims that are made here.

Findings and Discussion

A Museum for a “New” Scotland

The first question to be addressed is, “Does the Museum of Scotland construct a vision of a “new” Scotland?” To tease out a sense of what representations of Scotland were in fact being read by the visitors, the question was asked in the 1998 survey of the Museum of Scotland visitors, “Do you think that the Museum is trying to present any particular image of Scotland?” More than half of the responses from each of the target groups related to the pedagogical role of the museum, as a repository of history. Thus, a typical answer stated,

It’s showing what we have historically in artefacts.

A significant minority of a quarter of the visitors though, made a link between the historical artefacts and their relationship to the present and future. For example,

I think that what it is saying is that Scotland is modern and a modern society, and we’re changing, and there’s going to be big changes in the future.

A developing pioneering image.

Yes, I think it’s trying to say we’re really cutting edge and cool and modern.

I would say that Scotland is a vibrant society, that it’s very interested in its heritage, and it’s a mixture of looking back from the forward looking pavilion really.

The Museum then, was viewed not merely as a repository of history, but as a vision for the future of Scotland. This clearly needs to be set in the contemporary climate of a “new” Scotland with its own Parliament. As with other findings from this research that suggested a “new” found pride in Scotland (Cooke & McLean, 2002), the Museum was considered to be reflecting the history of Scotland but in a way that suggested its pride and confidence in a new political era. That confidence marked it from its “Other,” asserting itself within its relationship with England. As one Scottish visitor commented,

I think, it does actually identify Scotland as being a very separate entity with a very particular history as distinguished from generally British history. . . .

[Interviewer: Do you get the sense that the Museum is trying to present a particular image of Scotland?]

I think, I think there are odd times, odd things that made me smile. They were being very careful, well, it’s hard to say really, but it’s hard I think with the, with . . . devolution and the political atmosphere outside to completely divorce what’s happening out there with, with what the museum is saying in here. . . .

As Samuel (1994) has argued, history is a continual process of reinterpretation for the purposes
of the present. Memory is continually “changing colour and shape according to the energies of the moment; that so far from being handed down in the timeless form of “tradition” it is progressively altered from generation to generation” (p. x). It could be argued, then, that if the visitor to the Museum is reading a narrative of a “new” Scotland from historical objects, then surely they are constructing a narrative of Scotland with which they can identify. It is not important who is constructing that narrative, either the Museum creators or the visitor. What is important is that the museum facilitates such readings.

Relegating Myths to the Mist?

Given this finding, that the visitors discerned a “new” Scotland in the Museum of Scotland, the authors expected this change to be manifested in a sense of a “real” Scotland as opposed to a “mythic” Scotland. Thus, the second question was asked, “Does the Museum of Scotland construct a symbol of a ‘real’ Scotland?” The Museum’s creators designed the Museum with the intention of enabling the visitors to take their own readings of Scottish history. This appeared to concur with the views of the potential visitors to the Museum interviewed in 1997, who were keen to be offered a portrayal of Scotland far removed from the mythic iconography. The respondents were asked, “What would you personally like to see in a Museum of Scotland?” A typical answer from the majority of local visitors was,

I suppose the Scottish made articles of value, of note, not the tartan tat that we have fudged off on visitors.

Another question asked, “What do you think that the Museum of Scotland should be saying about Scotland?” The responses of a significant minority of a third of Scots and UK tourists again focused on the iconography of Scotland and the debunking of the Highlandism myths of Scotland, through representation of alternative stories of Scotland.

Hopefully it should try and put forward an honest description of the history of Scotland and the Scottish people. I think Scotland has got quite a distinct image abroad but it is often a shorthand type image and it would be nice if visitors coming here could see a little of the true Scotland.

Well, as long as they get away from the haggis and the kilts and things, anything that is Scottish.

Not tartan and haggis. I am very much against that. I think we are sufficiently intelligent people that we can do away with that image.

In the 1999 survey of the visitors to the Museum of Scotland a number of questions were asked that attempted to ascertain the understandings of Scotland that the visitors were taking away with them. If the Museum was keen not to prescribe a Highland mythic Scotland, did they in fact succeed? In response to the question, “What do you think that the Museum of Scotland is saying about Scotland?,” one respondent voiced the views of a significant minority of visitors, Scots, UK and overseas alike,

I think it’s saying much broader things than the stereotypes that have been presented at a tourism level, and which tends to be the image that’s portrayed.

Equally, when asked, “Do you think that the Museum is trying to present any particular image of Scotland?,” a significant minority of responses alluded to Scottish iconography, but in respect to the omission of it rather than its portrayal. Thus, the Museum was often referred to as,

... more forward-looking rather than tartan and haggis.

Clearly then, the Highlandism iconography is regarded as a problem by a number of visitors, although in terms of tourism promotion it would be regarded as a strength (Griggs, 2000). There is recognition that the Museum is portraying a Scotland that goes beyond the myth making.

Not all visitors were convinced, though, that the Museum had inculcated a sense of Scotland that went beyond the myths. One visitor voiced the opinion of a small minority of the respondents. When asked, “What would you yourself put in the Twentieth Century Gallery?,” one respondent suggested,

Probably something dull and worthy! I don’t know. More about Scotland and what people do. I don’t think people have a very good idea about what Scotland is like, the kind of industry people work in, the jobs they do, about higher education, some of the myths perpetrated through Scottish education, whether they are true or not true.

[Interviewer: So you’d actually like to see the Museum dealing with these myth and reality type issues?]
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Nostalgia and the Search for Identity

The research attempted to elicit if the individual identified with a national museum on a collective rather than an individual basis. Thus, the third question asked, “Does the Museum of Scotland construct a collective identity of Scotland?” In the 1997 interviews the prospective visitors were asked how they thought they themselves would be represented in the Museum. For the majority of the Scottish respondents there was an explicit assumption that, as Scots, they would be represented. This signified a collective identity of Scots. Thus,

Well, I think that if it is a Scottish museum obviously I’m going to be represented in it.

I suppose just as a Scot. While you may not have direct links to many aspects of the heritage and culture there is a connection there, and so, yes, you are represented as much as any Scot is.

However, many respondents, regardless of target segment, suggested a lack of connection with the exhibitions they thought would be presented in the new museum. Some denied that they would be represented. For example, responses included,

I have no idea.

Me? I doubt it will be me. It will be something more important than me I should hope.

I think I am only a cog in the wheel. I don’t think I’m important enough to be represented anywhere.

This misunderstanding or rejection could be understood with reference to the potential variance between the authors’ understanding of “representation” in terms of representative culture and history, with the respondents’ understanding of the concept, who perhaps saw it as how will they as a recognizable self be represented in the Museum. However, other evidence suggests that this identification process is mediated through the representation of history as either collective or as connecting with them and their lives.

Well, actually, I will feel represented as long as enough about daily life in current Scotland is in there, and as long as the current bit is not completely overwhelmed by the history of the great and the good.
In 1999, when the visitors to the Museum of Scotland were interviewed, the identification process was built more on the individual identity than the collective identity. Thus, typical responses from the majority of Scottish visitors to the question, “Do you think you are represented within the Museum?” included,

Well, yes, yes, because I actually left to go and live in Canada and then I found myself coming back because there are certain things around there that you just can’t have, so I’ve come back.

Yes, my son told me that when he saw the ranges, the old ranges that used to be in houses, that I would remember that and I do actually.

There are the bits that I grew up with because I go back to the 1930s and there is a lack of a difference since the 1940s with the standards of living. Everything has changed since I was a kid. You can see my mother’s and father’s Victorian life.

Probably in some respects, yes. That’s a tricky one. I wouldn’t expect to be, in the sense, I don’t know, maybe I have this idea of the museum as being full of things that are terribly important and interesting and I might not feel that I’m terribly important and interesting.

Evidence to suggest that the identification process is built upon recognition of “our story” comes from overseas visitors, especially those from the United States with connections to Scotland. For example, in the 1997 interviews, the Scottish diaspora envisaged an explicit connection to their “history” and ancestors.

I think coming into a museum where you could identify with a certain aspect. I mean, it would be like anything that would have to do with the Blair Castle and Atholl and that part of it. I think it gives you a personal identification point, it makes you kind of feel this is mine, this is part of me.

Oh goodness, well since I actually know the name of the clan that my grandfather came from, anything to do with that would give me some kind of connection.

To try to ascertain how people viewed the relationship between the Museum and the nation, the respondents in the 1997 interviews were asked whether they could see the museum changing what it meant to be Scottish. Again, the question generated a wide range of attitudes, including a complete rejection of the notion that what it meant to be Scottish could be influenced by the new Museum. However, unlike the issue of personal identity, other responses seemed to suggest that the museum’s relationship to defining the nation was more direct. Although the notion of “Scottishness” seemed to be located in the “character of the people,” and that this was though immune to change, it was also generally felt that the Museum would enhance or solidify what it meant to be “Scottish.”

I think it will enhance it, not necessarily change it.

I think it will just add to your Scottishness as such rather than take away from it.

I think it has got a contribution to make to enhance the sense of identity.

This may well be linked with the perceived role of a national museum as concerned with the collective imagining, telling the story of Scotland as a nation rather than the story of the individual. The visitors, then, take readings from the Museum of Scotland with which they identify themselves both as individuals and within the collective nation of Scotland.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest an almost contradictory reading of Scotland’s identity: as both mythic and contemporary. Given the fluidity of identity, though, this should be expected, where both interpretations exist side by side. Moreover, there is recognition by the museum visitors that there is a tension between the myth and the contemporary. As MacCannell (1992) has argued, tourism is at the forefront of the production of new cultural forms. However, rather than these new cultural forms being reduced merely to a “staged authenticity,” created for tourism purposes, the findings of this study indicate a more complex situation. The images that are being constructed by the visitors to the Museum of Scotland conform to the staged myths of Scotland. Yet at the same time, the readings also reflect a contemporary political and cultural understanding of the nation of Scotland. We need to subscribe to the tourist a more active part in reading meanings, not only the domestic tourist, but also the overseas tourist. We are not dealing here with a passive audience that is unable to differentiate between the various meanings of national iden-
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