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THE BREAK-UP OF BRITAIN? SCOTLAND AND THE END OF EMPIRE *The Prothero Lecture*

T. M. Devine

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THE BREAK-UP OF BRITAIN? SCOTLAND AND THE END OF EMPIRE

The Prothero Lecture

By T. M. Devine

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ABSTRACT. The essay is concerned with the retreat from the British empire and specifically with the Scottish aspects of that process. It is now acknowledged that the Scottish role in the imperial project was central. Hence there is a special interest in tracing the response to the end of empire north of the border. Several historians and political scientists have argued that imperial decline was likely to destroy one of the key foundations of the Anglo-Scottish Union. This essay challenges these assumptions by demonstrating that imperial decline failed to produce much political concern in Scotland. The possible reasons for this are considered.

I

Most of the great territorial empires in world history have broken up slowly over several generations of decline and decay. This was not so in the case of Britain. As late as 1945 its empire was still virtually intact with British rule extending across the oceans of the globe and populations of around 700 million people. A mere two decades later, this figure had fallen to 5 million of which 3 million were concentrated in Hong Kong. In June 1997, even that last major outpost of empire was handed back to the Chinese when the Black Watch played *Auld Lang Syne* as the Union Jack was lowered over the territory for the very last time.

The end of empire was not only rapid, it was also remarkably peaceful. True, there were outbreaks of nationalist hostility in Cyprus, Aden and Kenya during the imperial retreat. But in Britain itself all was calm. Indeed, as several scholars have noted, the British seem to have accepted the collapse of their empire with an equanimity bordering on indifference. Here contrasts are often drawn with the experience of France and Portugal. Both had much smaller empires than the British in Africa, Asia and Indo-China. Yet in these two countries decolonisation was followed by social trauma and political convulsion at home.¹

¹ John Darwin, *The End of the British Empire. The Historical Debate* (Oxford, 1991), 1–4, 34–5; *idem*, *Britain and Decolonisation* (1988), 324, 328; *The Oxford History of the British Empire. The Twentieth Century*, ed. Judith M. Brown and W. R. Lewis (Oxford, 1999), 330, 706.

In one important sense the relative silence in Britain, outside the right wing of the Conservative Party, is intriguing. As the break-up of empire loomed, some commentators predicted that imperial decline must place considerable strain on the Anglo-Scottish Union. As early as 1937, Andrew Dewar Gibb, Professor of Constitutional Law in the University of Glasgow and a prominent nationalist with deep imperial sympathies, noted in his *Scottish Empire* that ‘The existence of the Empire has been the most important factor in securing the relationship of Scotland and England in the last three centuries.’² He implied that without empire this ancient political connection might not stand the test of time. Similarly in his last work, Sir Reginald Coupland, a distinguished imperial historian of the old school, considered the potential rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism in the aftermath of decolonisation and gloomily concluded that Ireland might not be the last of the nations of the British Isles to leave the United Kingdom.³

This theme was taken up even more vigorously in the 1960s and 1970s as the Scottish National Party (SNP) began to achieve its first spectacular successes in elections. Commentators as varied as H. J. Hanham, Jan Morris and Tom Nairn outlined a possible relationship between the end of empire and dissolution of the Union. Hanham’s *Scottish Nationalism*, published in 1969, two years after Winnie Ewing’s sensational by-election SNP victory at Hamilton, observed:

Now that the Empire is dead many Scots feel cramped and restricted at home. They chafe at the provincialism of much of Scottish life and at the slowness of Scottish economic growth, which is related to that provincialism. To give themselves an opening to a wider world the Scots need some sort of outlet, and the choice appears at the moment to be between emigration and re-creating the Scottish nation at home.⁴

For Jan Morris, an author who had written extensively about the British empire, there was no longer much scope for a shared pride between the nations of the United Kingdom with the acceleration of decolonisation. All that remained in the Union, she remarked memorably, was ‘this grubby wreck of old glories’ in which few could take any satisfaction. Hence, the time was ripe for a new constitutional beginning.⁵ It was then left to the Marxist writer, Tom Nairn, in 1977 to provide a full-scale analysis of those issues. For him, the break-up of Britain was not only inevitable but necessary as a constructive response to the crisis in the Union triggered by the end of empire.⁶

² Andrew Dewar Gibb, *Scottish Empire* (1937), 311.

³ Sir Reginald Coupland, *Welsh and Scottish Nationalism* (1954), xv, 12, 13.

⁴ H. J. Hanham, *Scottish Nationalism* (1969), 212.

⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 24 Feb. 1979, cited in Keith Robbins, ‘“This Grubby Wreck of Old Glories”: The United Kingdom and the End of the British Empire’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 15 (1980), 84.

⁶ Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977), 118–20.

These observers and others had, on the face of it, a plausible case. The British empire was seen traditionally as a vital economic cement of Union as, for the Scots from the later eighteenth century onwards, the empire provided a remarkable set of opportunities in trade, the professions, military service and administration for the Scottish upper and middle classes while the entire production structure of Scottish industry from the age of cotton to the era of heavy industry was built around imperial markets.⁷ Since the empire supplied a powerful material rationale for Union, it therefore seemed attractive to argue that with its disappearance the economic anchor which had for so long bound Scotland to England could easily also be cut adrift. This point was apparently given added force by the analysis of Tom Nairn, George Davie and others of the long-run history of nationalism in Scotland. For them the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were an epoch of profound crisis for Scottish nationhood. In Europe during these decades the Scots were out of step as, throughout the continent, small historic nations asserted their rights to self-determination and independence. In Scotland, however, nationalism in this form was conspicuous by its absence. Their argument is that the Scottish professional and mercantile elites were seduced by the glittering prizes of empire, selling in the process their distinctive identity and ancient autonomy for a share of the imperial spoils. With decolonisation, on the other hand, nationalist aspirations could once again come to the fore.⁸ As John Mackenzie has put it in his commentary on this argument:

With the end of Empire the Scots could at last escape from their self-interested complicity and reunite nation with state after the dramatic rupture of that particular Union. With the loss of the colonies, the imperial cataracts can be removed from the eyes of the imperial collaborators and a new democratic dispensation can be discerned emerging from which the national ophthalmologist can free the Scots as much as the subordinate peoples of the white settler territories, India and the dependant empire.⁹

Thus far, however, more than fifty years after the independence of India, the dire predictions of the disintegration of the Union have proven to be false. Indeed, arguably it is more secure now than it has been at any time since the late 1960s and 1970s when Scottish nationalism seemed to have achieved an unstoppable momentum. In 2005 the SNP is becalmed with less than 20 per cent of the popular vote in Scotland and the pro-Union parties are in the ascendant in the Scottish parliament.¹⁰

⁷ T. M. Devine, *Scotland's Empire 1600–1815* (2003); *idem*, *Scotland's Empire and the Shaping of the Americas* (Washington, 2003); Michael Fry, *The Scottish Empire* (Edinburgh, 2001).

⁸ Nairn, *Break-Up*, 162; R. J. Finlay, 'Controlling the Past: Scottish Historiography and Scottish Identity in the 19th and 20th centuries', *Scottish Affairs*, 9 (1994), 127–43.

⁹ John M. Mackenzie, 'A Scottish Empire? The Scottish Diaspora and Interactive Identities', in *The Heather and the Fern. Scottish Migration and New Zealand Settlement*, ed. T. Brooking and J. Coleman (Otago, 2003), 19.

¹⁰ Lindsay Paterson *et al.*, *New Scotland, New Politics?* (Edinburgh, 2001), 83–100.

George Robertson, a former secretary of state for Scotland and director-general of NATO, famously observed that devolution would kill Scottish political nationalism stone dead. Whether this is a correct diagnosis or not, it is still tolerably clear that the advent of a Scottish parliament has not precipitated a headlong rush to full independence, despite the fears of many Unionists.

In truth, of course, the Union was itself transformed by the devolution of important powers to Edinburgh in 1999. But any direct or convincing link between the end of empire and the new constitutional settlement has yet to be demonstrated. Political scientists and modern Scottish historians have tended to look elsewhere for the root causes of devolution and have found them in the disenchantment felt in Scotland in the 1960s and 1970s when both Tory and Labour, the two 'Unionist' parties, were incapable of delivering long-term economic and social benefit as UK governments struggled against recurrent currency crises and the menace of rising inflation.¹¹ However, these pressures were not yet enough to trigger general hostility in Scotland to the terms of the constitutional relationship with England, as the failed referendum on a Scottish Assembly in 1979 made clear. Only in the 1990s did such a consensus emerge. Then it was fashioned not by any nostalgia for lost imperial glory but by the profound economic crises of the 1980s, the 'democratic deficit' caused by the cleavage between Scottish and English voting patterns and perhaps, above all, by growing opposition to the social policies of a succession of Conservative governments. Mrs Thatcher has an infinitely greater claim to be the midwife of Scottish devolution than the factor of imperial decline.¹²

Indeed, historically, Scottish Home Rule and empire were not incompatible. The first search for some form of devolution for Scotland took place in the late nineteenth century at the high noon of the British empire and was seen by its protagonists as a means to ensuring that the governance of empire might be improved. This was not just a theoretical discussion. A series of Home Rule Acts were promulgated between the 1880s and 1914. In 1913 the policy had secured widespread agreement and was merely awaiting parliamentary time and the solution of the Irish question. The outbreak of the First World War, however, put paid to this aspiration.¹³

There is also the problem of chronology in associating the rise of Scottish political nationalism with imperial decline in the 1940s and 1950s. The Scots mainly identified with the colonies of white settlement, Canada,

¹¹ I. G. C. Hutchison, *Scottish Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, 2001), 121–2; Keith Webb, *The Growth of Nationalism in Scotland* (Glasgow, 1977), 85–90.

¹² T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700–2000* (1999), 604–5.

¹³ Fry, *Empire*, 380, 388, 496; Webb, *Nationalism*, 87.

South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. These were the countries which had experienced mass Scottish immigration since the eighteenth century. Ties of kindred, friendship and identity with them were close. But these dominions had enjoyed autonomy since the Statute of Westminster in 1931 while at the same time retaining a symbolic and sentimental form of attachment to the mother country through the British Commonwealth of Nations. The process of decolonisation in Asia and Africa after 1945, which was chronologically closer to the rise of the SNP, evoked little protest or opposition in Scotland. On the contrary, the Church of Scotland vigorously supported the cause of black nationalism in Africa and, through its annual General Assembly, criticised the government for not conceding independence more quickly.¹⁴ The position of the Church on this issue was deeply significant. To a much greater extent than today it was a national church with a membership which historically reached an all-time high in the late 1950s. Traditionally, in this stateless nation, the Church of Scotland was regarded as a kind of surrogate parliament which spoke for the country on matters of contemporary political and social importance as well as religious issues through its General Assembly. The proceedings of this body were then widely reported and discussed in the Scottish press.¹⁵

II

We are therefore left with a conundrum. Historians claim that Scotland was heavily involved with the imperial project, yet the passing of empire seems to have had little perceptible consequence on the nation. Certainly the anticipated causal relationship between the end of empire and the dissolution of the Union has proven thus far to be fallacious. One possible way of resolving the puzzle is to question the very premise that the British empire was of central significance to the British people. This view has a long pedigree. Some time ago, for instance, the novelist, H. G. Wells, famously remarked that nineteen Englishmen out of twenty knew as much about the British empire as they did about the Italian Renaissance.¹⁶ Historians as different as Max Beloff and A. J. P. Taylor also insisted that imperialism was on the whole an irrelevant factor in the lives of most Britons.¹⁷ From a similar perspective James Morris argued

¹⁴ T. Royle, *Winds of Change. The End of Empire in Africa* (1996), 231; R. Ferguson, *George MacLeod* (1990), 299.

¹⁵ Callum Brown, *The Social History of Religion in Scotland since 1730* (1987), 209–47.

¹⁶ Bill Nasson, *Britannia's Empire. Making a British World* (Stroud, 2004), 208.

¹⁷ John M. Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire* (Manchester, 1984), 1.

that few people in the United Kingdom found the empire of any great significance or interest.¹⁸

More recently, however, the most powerful and detailed exploration of this thesis has come from the pen of Bernard Porter in *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain* (2004). Despite its subtitle, Porter's focus is almost entirely Anglocentric. In 108 pages of end-notes and 30 pages of 'select' bibliography, there is only one article with a Scottish emphasis. Essentially, therefore, it is for English historians to judge the overall validity of his argument. But Porter's general thesis hardly convinces in a specific Scottish context. Far from being a marginal factor in the nation's domestic history, empire was crucial to the Scottish experience during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, one author has recently claimed that so fundamental to the moulding of the modern nation was the British empire that it should rank alongside the Reformation, the Union of 1707 and the Enlightenment as one of the truly seminal developments in Scottish history.¹⁹ So intense was Scottish engagement with empire that it had an impact on almost every nook and cranny of Scottish life over these two centuries: economy, identity, politics, intellectual activity, popular culture, consumerism, religion, demographic trends and much else.²⁰

In the eighteenth century the colonial tobacco and sugar trades were two of the key drivers of Scottish industrialisation while during the Victorian and Edwardian eras the Scottish heavy industrial economy was strongly biased towards export markets and the principal outlets for ships, locomotives and engineering products were the British colonies.²¹ Dundee, one of Scotland's four principal cities, became 'Juteopolis', its booming textile industry founded on the importation of raw jute from India. Gordon Stewart, later an historian who went on to write an important study of jute, recalled the imperial connections of his native city:

I grew up in Dundee and I thought that the Scottish city was the centre of the world jute trade. This impression was dinned into me by my geography lessons at school and by a host of childhood encounters with jute. When I felt depressed by the drabness of life amidst the row of identical, rain-stained buildings on the housing scheme where I lived, I would pedal my bike down to the docks and watch hundreds of bales of jute being unloaded from the holds of great cargo steamers which had sailed half-way round the world from Chittagong and Calcutta. On the way home from school I would sit on city buses crowded with women workers coming off their shifts with wisps of jute sticking

¹⁸ James Morris, 'The Popularisation of Imperial History', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 1 (1973), 113–18.

¹⁹ Fry, *Empire*, 498.

²⁰ John M. Mackenzie, 'Essay and Reflection: On Scotland and Empire', *International History Review*, 15 (1993), 714–39.

²¹ Devine, *Empire*, 69–93, 221–49; M. S. Moss and J. R. Hume, *Workshop of the British Empire. Engineering and Shipbuilding in the West of Scotland* (1977).

to their hair and clothes and their hands roughened red by the handling of jute in the factories . . . Because of the names on the sterns of the cargo ships and the faces of the crewmen, I understood there was an Indian dimension to jute. I also learned of this connection by listening to family stories about relatives and friends of my parents who had spent time in India.²²

In Glasgow, the economic connections were equally deep. It arrogated to itself the description ‘Second City of the Empire’ (a term first used as early as 1824) while the broader west of Scotland region was celebrated as ‘The Workshop of the British Empire’. Scottish society more generally had strong ties to empire. As one author has put it, the Scots professional and middle classes claimed ‘not merely a reasonable but a quite indecent share of the [imperial] spoils’.²³ Throughout the eighteenth and for much of the nineteenth centuries, Scottish educators, physicians, soldiers, administrators, missionaries, engineers, scientists and merchants relentlessly penetrated every corner of the empire and beyond so that when the statistical record for virtually any area of professional employment is examined, Scots are seen to be over-represented.²⁴

This elite emigration was but one element in a greater mass diaspora from Scotland. Between 1825 and 1938 over 2.3 million Scots left their homeland for overseas destinations. This placed the country with Ireland and Norway in the top three of European countries with the highest levels of net emigration throughout that period. The emigrants had three main destinations – USA (after 1783), British North America (which became the Dominion of Canada in 1867) and Australia. After *c.* 1840 the USA was the choice of most who left but Canada predominated in the early twentieth century. Also in the 1850s Australia, for a period, was taking more Scots than each of the two North American countries considered individually.²⁵ These huge levels of emigration generated a vast network of family and individual connections with the colonies and dominions which were consolidated by return migration (in one estimate averaging more than 40 per cent of the total exodus in the 1890s), chain migration, letter correspondence and widespread coverage of the emigrant experience in Scottish popular press and periodical literature.²⁶

The British empire also had a potent influence on Scottish national consciousness and identity. Several recent analyses have emphasised that

²² Gordon Stewart, *Jute and Empire* (Manchester, 1998), ix.

²³ D. Allan, *Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (Harlow, 2002), 185.

²⁴ Devine, *Empire*, xxv–xxvii.

²⁵ M. Gray, ‘The Course of Scottish Emigration, 1750–1914: Enduring Influences and Changing Circumstances’, in *Scottish Emigration and Scottish Society*, ed. T. M. Devine (Edinburgh, 1992), 16–36.

²⁶ M. Harper, *Emigration from Scotland between the Wars* (Manchester, 1998), 6–13; *idem*, *Adventurers and Exiles* (London, 2003), 237–81; *idem*, ‘Introduction’, in *Emigrant Homecomings: The Return Movement of Emigrants, 1600–2000*, ed. M. Harper (Manchester, 2005), 1–15.

for the Scots elite in the years before 1914 nationalism was not in conflict with the Union but rather was integrated closely with it. The empire was the means by which the Scots asserted their equal partnership with England after 1707. By the Victorian era it was commonplace to assert that substantial imperial expansion only occurred after the Union and hence was a joint endeavour in which the Scots had played a full part.²⁷ This was no empty boast. Scottish publicists, through such works as John Hill Burton's *The Scots Abroad* (2 vols., 1864) and W. J. Rattray's monumental four-volume *magnum opus*, *The Scot in British North America* (1880), were easily able to demonstrate the mark that Scottish education (especially at college and university level), presbyterianism, medicine, trading networks and philosophical enquiry had had on the colonies.²⁸ Pride in the Scottish achievement was taken even further by those who saw the Scottish people as a race of natural empire-builders. Thus the nationalist Andrew Dewar Gibb argued in 1930:

the position of Scotland as a Mother nation of the Empire is at all costs to be preserved to her. England and Scotland occupy a unique position as the begetters and defenders of the Empire. They alone of all the Aryan peoples in it have never been otherwise than sovereign and independent. Ireland and Wales, mere satrapies of England, can claim no comparable place. Scotsmen today are occupying places both eminent and humble throughout the Empire, and Scottish interests are bound up with every colony in it.²⁹

Nonetheless, it might be objected that the argument thus far ignores the important factor of differences in the attitudes of social class to empire. Bernard Porter in *The Absent-Minded Imperialists* focuses especially on this aspect. He sees the upper and middle classes as most committed to the imperial project while the working classes were 'either apathetic towards the empire or superficial in their attitude to it'. Porter also claims a deep ignorance about the empire on the part of the majority of the British people.³⁰

Again, this interpretation hardly fits the Scottish case. While it is impossible, of course, in the current state of knowledge to determine in precise terms what the ordinary Scot thought about empire it is nevertheless unlikely that the words 'apathy' and 'ignorance' are appropriate terms to use of public opinion. Exposure to imperial themes started early in Scotland. In 1907 the Scottish Education Department in its memorandum on the teaching of history in schools directed that

²⁷ R. J. Finlay, 'The Rise and Fall of Popular Imperialism in Scotland, 1850–1950', *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 113 (1997), 13–21; John M. Mackenzie, 'Empire and National Identities. The Case of Scotland', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, sixth series, 8 (1998), 215–32.

²⁸ David S. Forsyth, 'Empire and Union: Imperialism and National Identity in Nineteenth Century Scotland', *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 113 (1997), 6–12.

²⁹ A. D. Gibb, *Scotland in Eclipse* (1930), 187.

³⁰ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2004), 115–33.

the curriculum should develop from the study of Scotland to British and international themes but always throughout stressing the nation's role in the empire. Text books embodying this approach were soon available in schools and the most popular was *Cormack's Caledonia Readers* which placed emphasis on empire. As Robert Anderson has shown, the British empire had a key part to play in late nineteenth-century history teaching because it provided the kind of blend of British and Scottish history which reflected Scotland's position in the Union state.³¹

But this was not all. The 1900s also saw the celebration of Empire Day in schools when flags were exchanged between Scottish schools and those elsewhere in the empire. The stories of such imperial heroes as General Gordon, Sir Colin Campbell (of Indian Mutiny fame), the missionary Mary Slessor and, above all, David Livingstone would have been very well known to Scottish schoolchildren.³² Biographies of Livingstone, the 'Protestant Saint' and the most famous and venerated Scotsman of the nineteenth century, were widely read and also awarded as prizes in schools and Sunday Schools, a practice which continued unabated through to the 1960s.³³ Of course it was not simply children who were taught to respond to these imperial heroes. They were also celebrated by the trade union movement, working men's clubs and Labour politicians, such as Keir Hardie, as models of Scottish virtue and exemplars for the nation. Knowledge of and loyalty to empire was also communicated by such organisations as the Junior Empire League with around 20,000 members and the Boys' Brigade. This last was formed in Glasgow in 1883 and not only promoted Christian values but also inculcated fidelity to the imperial ideal within its membership. The 'BBs' became enormously popular among ordinary young Scots boys well into the twentieth century.³⁴

Among the mass of the population, however, perhaps the main symbols of empire were the Scottish regiments. Recognised as the spearheads of imperial expansion, and widely celebrated in music, story, painting and statue as the tartan-clad icons of the Scottish nation, they enjoyed, as Stuart Allan and Allan Carswell have put it, 'unchallenged prominence in Scottish society as symbols of national self-image'.³⁵ Ironically, despite the fame of the Highland soldier, the kilted battalions were mainly recruited during the Victorian age from the working class of the Scottish cities. Their exploits were widely reported not simply in the popular press but

³¹ R. D. Anderson, *Education and the Scottish People 1750–1918* (Oxford, 1995), 212–13, 218–19.

³² *Ibid.*, 218–19.

³³ Andrew C. Ross, 'Christian Missions and the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Change in Attitudes. Race: The African Experience', in *The Imperial Horizons of the British Protestant Missions, 1880–1914*, ed. Andrew Porter (2003), 102–3.

³⁴ Mackenzie, 'Identities', 226.

³⁵ Stuart Allan and Allan Carswell, *The Thin Red Line. War, Empire and Visions of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2004), 40.

in such famous paintings as *The Thin Red Line*. The regiments made a remarkable impact on Scottish consciousness. Seen as the heirs of a martial national tradition which went back for centuries, they also acted as important catalysts for the wide diffusion of the military ethic throughout the country.³⁶ One major spin-off was the Volunteer movement which developed into a permanent reserve force for the army and attracted many thousands of young Scotsmen. The Volunteers were a focus for local pride but they also strongly identified with the British empire. Both the Volunteers and the Boys' Brigade adopted army ranks and nomenclature, undertook military drill and were regularly inspected by army officers. The important influence of both organisations goes a long way to explaining the exceptional scale of voluntary recruitment into the army in Scotland when war broke out in 1914.³⁷ More generally, the fame and significance of the Scottish military tradition lives on even to the present day as illustrated by the extraordinary and continuing success of the Edinburgh Military Tattoo and political controversies during the 2005 General Election over the proposed reorganisation of the historic Scottish regiments.

III

There therefore seems on the face of it to be a huge gap between the imperial enthusiasms of the nineteenth century and the apparent equanimity with which Scotland accepted decolonisation in the middle decades of the twentieth century. It will be argued here that the crucial period for understanding this transformation in attitude to empire occurred between the 1920s and 1950s, despite the fact that imperial sentiment did not entirely fade away during these decades.

There is, after all, plenty of evidence of continuity in the years after 1918. The massive war losses suffered by Scotland, officially counted at 74,000 but unofficially reckoned to be over 110,000, were commemorated in the Scottish National War Memorial, completed in Edinburgh Castle in 1927. It was not simply a remarkable tribute in stone to the nation's fallen but also to the sons and grandsons of Scotland from the empire. The Roll of Honour included all those who had served in Scottish regiments and in those of the dominions overseas, eloquent affirmation of the continuing importance of the imperial bond.³⁸ The link between empire and the

³⁶ Devine, *Empire*, 290–319; Heather Streets, 'Identity in the Highland Regiments in the Nineteenth Century; Soldier, Region, Nation', in *Fighting for Identity. The Scottish Military Experience c. 1550–1900*, ed. S. Murdoch and A. Mackillop (Leiden, 2002).

³⁷ H. J. Hanham, 'Religion and Nationality in the Mid-Victorian Army', in *War and Society*, ed. M. R. D. Foot (1973), 173.

³⁸ E. W. McFarland, 'Introduction: "A Coronach in Stone"', in *Scotland and the Great War*, ed. Catriona M. M. Macdonald and E. W. McFarland (East Lothian, 1999), 1–2.

nation Church also seemed intact. The cult of David Livingstone reached its apotheosis in the 1920s when many small donations by ordinary Scots financed the creation of the Livingstone Memorial Centre in Blantyre, Lanarkshire, in the cotton mill complex where the legendary explorer and missionary had worked as a boy. The Centre remained a place of pilgrimage for schools and Sunday Schools until the 1950s.³⁹ The public face of imperial Scotland seemed also to have changed little. A great imperial exhibition was held in Glasgow in 1938, the fourth in a series which since the 1890s had attracted literally millions of visitors.⁴⁰ As late as 1951 a colonial week was held in the same city. Empire was also still very much on the political agenda. In the inter-war years factional arguments raged in the Scottish nationalist movement over the nature of the relationship which a self-governing Scotland would have with the empire. Even the Labour Party temporarily diluted earlier hostility and some of its leading intellectuals in Scotland, including John Wheatley, argued that through the empire could come not only economic regeneration but also the hope of protecting a socialist Britain from the menace of international capitalism.⁴¹

In some ways, however, all this was a mirage, a false image of continuity after the trauma of the Great War. Andrew Dewar Gibb in 1937 recognised the change. With the granting of dominion status to the colonies of white settlement, he observed 'the hegemony of Britain in the Empire is steadily becoming more formal and more ornamental'.⁴² Popular imperialism also waned. Scholars now regard the Glasgow Empire Exhibition of 1938 not so much as a catalyst for regenerating imperial enthusiasms as an event of mere nostalgic significance.⁴³ Iain Hutchison has also noted that in the 1945 election both Scottish Tory and Labour candidates referred even less frequently in their manifestos to imperial themes than their English counterparts.⁴⁴ This was a symbolic and ominous prelude to the results of that election, when the Unionists, *par excellence* the party of empire, were roundly defeated by Labour which had a quite different set of political and social priorities for the future governance of Scotland.

The traditional career route of middle-class Scots into imperial administration was crumbling. In this respect the Indian Civil Service

³⁹ John M. Mackenzie, 'David Livingstone: The Construction of the Myth', in *Sermons and Battle Hymns: Protestant Popular Culture in Modern Scotland*, ed. G. Walker and T. Gallagher (Edinburgh, 1990), 24–42.

⁴⁰ P. Kinchin and J. Kinchin, *Glasgow's Great Exhibitions* (Bicester, 1988).

⁴¹ R. J. Finlay, "'For or Against?': Scottish Nationalists and the British Empire, 1919–39', *Scottish Historical Review*, 71 (1992), 184–206; Finlay, 'Imperialism', 20.

⁴² Gibb, *Eclipse*, 187.

⁴³ B. Crampsey, *The Empire Exhibition of 1938: The Last Durbar* (Edinburgh, 1988).

⁴⁴ Hutchison, *Politics*, 121–2.

(ICS) had long enjoyed pre-eminence in the rank order of colonial administrations. By 1939, Scots accounted for 13 per cent of the Europeans on the ICS books.⁴⁵ This was still marginally greater than the Scottish proportion of UK population. Nonetheless, this was a significantly lower ratio than in the eighteenth and for much of the nineteenth centuries. Indeed, Anthony Kirk-Greene suggests that demoralisation was rampant in the ICS after 1918 because of a perceived decline in its career prospects as Indian self-government became a likely prospect. Though recruitment to the service did not dry up, the ICS was confronted with what has been described a critical shortage of satisfactory recruits from Britain which became especially acute from the 1920s.⁴⁶

Scottish elite families were still exporting their male progeny but were no longer constrained to the same extent by opportunities within the formal empire. The great Scottish business syndicates of Jardine, Matheson and Co., the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, Burmah Oil Company, Guthries and Company and several others had become global rather than simply imperial corporations. The USA, Latin America, China and Japan all provided rich pickings for ambitious and educated Scots. They no longer, if they ever had, felt themselves restricted by imperial frontiers.⁴⁷ Above all, career goals were still more easily satisfied in London than in faraway places. Historians have been more interested in the exotic and have therefore tended to concentrate on the Scottish transoceanic experience. In truth, the London financial and business world had always been crucial.⁴⁸ The modern 'Scottish Raj' in the UK cabinet and the high-profile Scottish presence in the British media is simply the latest variant in a trend which goes back for many generations.

IV

No single cause conspired to erode Scotland's emotional attachment to empire. But the profound crisis which overwhelmed the nation in the period between the world wars in the twentieth century was a major factor. To understand this fully, however, it is necessary to describe the context of the long-term relationship between the Scottish economy and empire in the Victorian and Edwardian era. Such a perspective strongly suggests that the disastrous inter-war experience was the culmination of structural weaknesses which reached much further back in time.

⁴⁵ A. Kirk-Greene, *Britain's Imperial Administrators 1858–1966* (Basingstoke, 2000), 17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁷ R. A. Cage, *The Scots Abroad. Labour, Capital, Enterprise, 1750–1914* (1985).

⁴⁸ David Stenhouse, *On the Make. How the Scots took over London* (Edinburgh, 2004).

Certainly the close connections with imperial markets helped to boost productive capacity enormously in Scotland. One very significant consequence was a marked increase in Scottish population due to the economy's creation of more employment opportunities for the new generation. Thus, in 1701, Scotland had a total population of around 1.1 million. By 1831 the figure stood at 2.3 million and in 1911 had reached 4.7 million. Further confirmation of the dynamic nature of the economic system was the massive increase in immigration in the Victorian era, most notably from Ireland, but also including significant numbers of Italians, Jews and Lithuanians. This level of immigration over such a short period was something quite new in Scottish history and testimony to the economy's capacity to generate more employment opportunities.

Again, trading with the empire made some Scots very rich indeed. A handful of families amassed colossal fortunes. Sir Charles Tenant of the chemical empire, William Baird, the ironmaster, Sir James and Peter Coats of the threadmaking dynasty and William Weir, colliery owner and iron manufacturer, were among the forty individuals in Britain reckoned to be worth £2 million or more in the nineteenth century. Recent research has shown that the super-rich were also as well represented in Scotland as in any other part of the United Kingdom.⁴⁹ In addition to these fabulously wealthy but exceptional tycoons there were the solid ranks of the prosperous middle classes who ranged in occupational status from highly paid professionals such as lawyers to small businessmen and senior clerks. In his analysis of national income, published in 1867, the Victorian economist, R. Dudley Baxter, reckoned that 267,300 people were in this group in Scotland, had an annual income of between £100 and £1,000 and represented nearly one fifth of the total number of what he termed 'productive persons' in the country. The impact of the spending of this middle class could be seen in the elegant suburbs which blossomed around the major cities in the nineteenth century: Broughty Ferry near Dundee, the graceful terraces of the West End of Glasgow and the substantial villas of Newington and Corstorphine in Edinburgh.⁵⁰

The increases in the outflow of capital from Scotland after 1870 were also in part a reflection of the increases in savings among the Scottish middle classes. Most of this came through Scottish solicitors and chartered accountants raising funds on behalf of overseas clients from professional and business families at home. It was said that Edinburgh in

⁴⁹ W. D. Rubenstein, 'The Victorian Middle Classes: Wealth, Occupation and Geography', *Economic History Review*, second series, 30 (1977), 609–11, 614.

⁵⁰ Stena Nenadic, 'The Victorian Middle Classes', in *Glasgow, II: 1830 to 1912*, ed. W. H. Fraser and I. Maver (Manchester, 1996), 271–2.

the 1880s was ‘honeycombed’ with agents of these companies who were the main channel for this substantial mobilisation of middle-class capital.⁵¹ Certainly, Scottish middle incomes were on average fewer and lower than London and the metropolitan areas of the south but in the early twentieth century on a par with the major English industrial centres in Lancashire and Yorkshire. These regions, however, hardly compared with Scottish levels of overseas investment, one of the most telling manifestations of the new wealth. These grew from an estimated £60 million in 1870 to £500 million by 1914. Not all of this went to the imperial territories – land, mining and railway developments in the USA were also major beneficiaries – but much did. In the 1880s it was reckoned that three-quarters of the British companies established for overseas investment were of Scottish origin. Nearly half of all Australian borrowing in the late nineteenth century came from Scotland. Tea planting in Ceylon, jute production in India and railways in the Canadian West also benefited. One estimate for 1914 suggested that the value of overseas investment was equivalent to £110 for every Scot compared to the average of £90 for the United Kingdom as a whole.⁵² Here was unambiguous confirmation that Scotland’s imperial economy had indeed generated huge increases in capital. The social elites and many in the business and professional classes had done rather well out of empire.

The picture is, however, somewhat gloomier for the rest of the population. Scotland was a grossly unequal society in the heyday of its imperial success. R. D. Baxter’s calculations for 1867 suggest that around 70 per cent of ‘productive persons’ in Scotland, or almost a million people in total, belonged to his two bottom categories of ‘lower skilled’ and ‘unskilled’ which consisted of male workers who earned on average below £50 per annum.⁵³ For many at this level short-term unemployment was always a threat. Shipbuilding and the other capital goods industries were subject to intense and savage fluctuations in 1884–7, 1894, 1903–5 and 1908. In that last year, unemployment among Clydeside skilled engineers rose to nearly 20 per cent and among shipyard workers to almost a quarter. In the four major cities there were large pools of seasonal and casual labour, reckoned in the early 1900s at around 25 per cent of the work force, who were engaged in jobs such as portering, catering and street-selling where earnings were both paltry and unpredictable. For most of the period between 1830 and 1914 Scottish industrial wage rates

⁵¹ Quoted in A. S. J. Bastier, *The Imperial Banks* (1929).

⁵² C. H. Lee, ‘Economic Progress: Wealth and Poverty’, in *The Transformation of Scotland: The Economy since 1700*, ed. T. M. Devine, C. H. Lee and G. C. Peden (Edinburgh, 2005), 138–41.

⁵³ T. C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People 1830–1950* (1986), 109, 111.

were lower than the English average. The Board of Trade estimated in 1912 that real wages (after taking into account living costs) were fully 10 per cent less in Scottish towns than in their counterparts in England. Living costs on the other hand were higher.⁵⁴ For Glasgow, recent work by Richard Rodger has shown that the city's inhabitants paid on average over 5 per cent more for their food and rent (which accounted for four-fifths of the weekly working-class budget) than the population of Manchester, Leeds, Salford and Nottingham – and this against a background of low wages and volatile levels of employment on Clydeside.⁵⁵

That Victorian industry was not a source of general prosperity is confirmed by the examples of Scottish migration and housing in this period. Precisely at the time when manufacturing was achieving remarkable success in overseas markets the Scots, as noted above, were leaving their native land in large numbers for the USA, Canada and Australasia. Over 2 million people emigrated from Scotland between 1815 and 1939, a rate of outward movement that, per capita, was around one and a half times that for England and Wales. This figure did not include another 600,000 who moved south of the border. In the 1850s, for instance, the loss of young men from Scotland through emigration was considerably greater than that experienced in the years of human carnage during the First World War. Scotland was therefore almost alone among European countries in having experienced both large-scale industrialisation and a great outward movement of population. Most other societies prone to high levels of emigration were poor rural economies. It seemed that many Scots were voting with their feet in the search for better prospects than were easily available to them at home.⁵⁶

The condition of working-class housing confirmed that mass poverty was a marked feature of Scotland's age of empire and provoked endless investigation and comment by the early twentieth century. From these surveys it is abundantly clear that there was little real progress made between 1870 and 1914. Clive Lee has recently concluded that, 'by the eve of the First World War Scotland stood on the brink of a housing catastrophe'.⁵⁷ In 1911 nearly 50 per cent of the Scottish population lived in one- or two-roomed dwellings compared with just over 7 per cent in England. Rents were significantly higher north of the Border, 10 per cent greater than in Northumberland and Durham and almost 25 per cent higher than the other English midland and northern counties. Over

⁵⁴ T. M. Devine, 'Industrialisation', in *Transformation*, ed. Devine, Lee and Peden, 65–6; *idem*, 'Scotland', in *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain, 1: Industrialisation, 1700–1860*, ed. Roderick Floud and Paul Johnson (Cambridge, 2004), 388–416.

⁵⁵ R. Rodger, 'The Labour Force', in *Glasgow*, ed. Fraser and Maver, 163–85.

⁵⁶ T. M. Devine, 'The Paradox of Scottish Emigration', in *Emigration*, ed. Devine, 1–15.

⁵⁷ C. H. Lee, *Scotland and the United Kingdom* (Manchester, 1995), 46.

two million Scots in 1914, nearly half the population, lived more than two persons to a room, the contemporary definition of 'overcrowding'. The housing problem reflected the reality of low and fluctuating incomes. For families on limited earnings it made economic sense to take small tenement flats at a rental sufficiently affordable to avoid arrears or eviction. The problem was not so much availability of reasonable housing as the ability of very many to pay for it. In 1914, for instance, in Glasgow alone there were over 20,000 unoccupied houses or about a tenth of the city's total stock. The housing crisis was the most striking manifestation of the depth of Glasgow's poverty problem in the very decade when it proclaimed itself 'Second City of the Empire'.⁵⁸

The conclusion must be that despite high levels of emigration Scotland suffered from a chronic over-supply of labour in the heyday of empire.⁵⁹ Low pay, underemployment, casual work and broken time were all consistent with that pattern. Some Scots had grown wealthy but the majority, despite modest gains in the later nineteenth century, remained mired in poverty and endured a hard daily struggle to make ends meet. The imperial economy was also building up potential problems for the future. The dependency on low wages and semi-skilled or unskilled labour placed the nation at a strategic disadvantage in the twentieth century when home demand propelled the new consumer economy with its focus on household good, motor vehicles, cycles, furniture and electrical products. Scotland missed out on most of this 'second Industrial Revolution'. Even before 1914, the economic structure seemed precarious. The heavy industries were all inter-connected, geared to overseas markets, especially in the empire, and at risk from such mighty competitors as the USA and Germany. The threat was especially real because the Scots excelled at the making of simple capital goods such as iron, steel, locomotives, bridges and the like which could easily be rapidly imitated by emerging competitors. Imperial markets had therefore left a flawed legacy by 1914 with serious consequences for Scotland when international trade collapsed during several years between the wars.

The manifestations of crisis were everywhere. Unemployment soared to unprecedented levels in the early 1930s. In the industrial heartland of the western lowlands, 'The Workshop of the British Empire', over a quarter of the entire labour force, nearly 200,000 individuals were out of work in 1932. New industries failed to develop and poor housing and

⁵⁸ *Census of Population, Scotland (1911)*, II, 566–7; S. Damer, 'State, Class and Housing', in *Housing, Social Policy and the State*, ed. J. Melling (1980), 90.

⁵⁹ The following two paragraphs are based on Devine, *Scottish Nation*, 201–66, 268–72, and C. H. Lee, 'Unbalanced Growth: Prosperity and Deprivation', in *Transformation*, ed. Devine, Lee and Peden, 209–24.

slum conditions remained as bad as ever with overcrowding six times greater in 1935 than south of the Border. Fears were expressed in the business community of long-term economic decline and the erosion of indigenous Scottish control as several failing firms were bought up by financial interests from England. The unprecedented scale of emigration in the 1930s intensified these anxieties. So great was the exodus that the Scottish population actually fell by nearly 40,000 in that decade, the only period since records began in which absolute decline between censuses occurred.

Now, rather than being seen as evidence of the virility of an imperial race, emigration was viewed as a scourge and confirmation of a terminal national crisis. The novelist and poet, Edwin Muir, saw it as a 'silent clearance' in which 'the surroundings of industrialisation remain, but industry itself is vanishing like a dream'. His apocalyptic vision was of a country 'being emptied of its population, its spirit, its wealth, industry, art, intellect, and innate character'. As his fellow intellectual, George Malcolm Thomson, put it: 'The first fact about the Scot is that he is a man eclipsed. The Scots are a dying race.'⁶⁰

The most arresting illustration of the economic irrelevance of empire was the experience between the wars of the Dundee jute industry. Already, by the 1890s, Bengal had overtaken its Scottish parent to become the world's dominant centre for the jute sacks and hessian cloth which carried the world's foodstuffs and raw materials. Not surprisingly, in the depressed market conditions in the 1930s, Dundee jute interests pleaded on numerous occasions for tariffs to be imposed on the cheap imports from Calcutta. But their pleas were in vain. Now it was Dundee which looked more like the colony, and Bengal the metropole: 'jute presents an unusual example of a powerful industry emerging in a colonial setting which almost destroyed the rival industry back in Britain while the empire was still flourishing'.⁶¹

All this shattered faith in Scotland as the powerhouse of empire. Long before decolonisation took place, imperial markets were no longer seen to be of much benefit. Though the economy recovered during the Second World War and the immediate post-war period, the fully enfranchised masses now had other social priorities which could be delivered through the ballot box. It was therefore hardly surprising that the majority of the Scottish people reacted to the end of empire with indifference, despite Scotland's historic role before 1900 in imperial expansion. After 1945, state intervention in industry, political commitment to full employment and, above all, the Welfare State, slowly delivered security and material

⁶⁰ Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey* (Edinburgh, 1935), 110; G. M. Thomson, *Caledonia or the Future of the Scots* (Edinburgh, 1932), 18–19.

⁶¹ Stewart, *Jute*, 2–4.

improvement to the mass of Scots. These were the issues which now had widespread popular appeal, especially in the light of Scotland's social history over the previous century. The age of empire may have passed, but, ironically, the Union was now even more important than before. As one of the poorer parts of the United Kingdom, Scotland was likely to gain more than other regions from the introduction of an interventionist social and economic policy which was being implemented in the very decade that decolonisation accelerated through the independence of India.⁶² State support from cradle to grave became the new anchor of the Union state.

⁶² C. H. Lee, 'Unbalanced Growth: Prosperity and Deprivation', in *Transformation*, ed. Devine, Lee and Peden, 231.