Artistic Representations of Scottish Identity. About: Viccy Coltman, Art and Identity in Scotland. A Cultural History from the Jacobite Rising of 1745 to Walter Scott.

Marion Amblard, Walter Scott

books & ideas.net

Artistic Representations of Scottish Identity

By Marion Amblard

In her latest book, Viccy Coltman explores the evolution of Scottish identity in the long 18th century through the lens of its artistic representations both in Scotland and and abroad, thus revealing that it was much more multifaceted and complex than previously thought.

About: Viccy Coltman, *Art and Identity in Scotland. A Cultural History from the Jacobite Rising of 1745 to Walter Scott*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 320 p.

The Scottish School of painting was formed during the long 18th century and pictures from this period, along with various items of material culture, played a major role in the definition and expression of Scottish identity, as Viccy Coltman convincingly demonstrates in her latest book entitled *Art and Identity in Scotland. A Cultural History from the Jacobite Rising of 1745 to Walter Scott*. Coltman, a specialist in the reception of the antique in 18th-century Britain, has mainly based her study on previously unpublished archival materials as well as on visual and material culture, including clothes, glasses and medals among others, to investigate Scottish identity and its evolution over the period stretching from the last Jacobite rising[1] to the death of Sir Walter Scott in 1832. Her book is composed of two parts. First, she explores how

[1] The Jacobites were the supporters of the deposed Stuart king, James II of England, and his descendants. Several rebellions took place in the 18th century to restore the House of Stuart to the British throne. The main risings occurred in 1708, 1715, 1719 and in 1745/1746.

this identity was experienced and represented beyond Scotland in Europe, London and Empire and then she focuses on the way the Scots within Scotland perceived their national identity.

Scottish identity: a complex and multifaceted concept

In the introduction, Coltman draws on the seminal works of Benedict Anderson and Linda Colley to define the concept of national identity and then to study more particularly Scottish identity as expressed through visual and material forms.[2] She reminds the reader of the fact that the concept of national identity is both complex, elastic and multifaceted being composed of several categories including personal, political and occupational identities. Now these identities are not concentric circles as they are overlapping. Sometimes one of them prevails over the others as is illustrated with the Caledonian architect George Steuart, who mainly worked in London. Following the example of Steuart who settled in England in the 1760s, many Scots moved to the capital where they had to face English xenophobia as can be seen, for instance, in the satires of the artist Richard Newton representing poor bare-buttocked Scots invading London, like insects, in the hope of having a successful career and getting rich. Coltman emphasises that, contrary to the prejudiced idea, the Scots in the capital did not always form a close-knit community. In fact national solidarity was not prevalent at all times and their relations with their fellow countrymen were sometimes far from friendly. Indeed Coltman uses the correspondence of Steuart, from Blair Atholl in the Highlands, with the Dukes of Atholl to reveal his rivalry with his fellow Scots Robert and James Adam, from the Lowlands, who were some of the most successful architects in London. Yet if his fame and fortune cannot be compared to the Adams', Steuart was able to make a name for himself thanks to the support of his Highland patrons and their networks. Thus, as is exemplified through the case of Steuart, regional identity was sometimes stronger than national identity.

Coltman's book also reveals that a new Scottish identity was forged at the same time as a British identity. Colley defines British identity as being formed in contra-distinction to France, which was then Britain's main commercial and colonial rival. According to Coltman, what characterized the new Scottish identity was its tripartite dimension being binational – both Scottish and British – and reflecting the three

[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983; Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992.

distinct geographical and cultural territories of Scotland: the Highlands, the Lowlands and the Borders.

The forging of Scottish identity and its representations between 1745 and 1822

The time frame under scrutiny was a period of major economic, social and cultural change in Scotland. 1745, beginning of the last Jacobite rebellion, marked a turning point in the way the Lowland Scots perceived their countrymen living in the Highlands. Indeed, they had but little in common – they did not speak the same language and their culture was different – and, until then, the Lowlanders had had a very poor opinion on the Highlanders who they considered as lawless, primitive and lazy. However, within fifty years, the Highlanders and their culture were rehabilitated and the plaid and tartan, traditionally worn in the Highlands, became two of the main symbols of the newly defined Scottish identity. As is demonstrated by Coltman thanks to her study of the evolution of the symbolic of the Highland dress through visual and material culture, this rehabilitation proceeded in several stages. First, the plaid and the tartan were closely associated with Jacobitism and embodied insurrection. After the Jacobite uprising, the British government passed a series of laws to suppress the clan system and the Highland culture which were considered as internal political threats to the British establishment. One of these laws was the Disarming Act of 1746 which prohibited the bearing of arms and the wearing of the Highland dress in Scotland. As is highlighted by Coltman, this apparel was often used in the pictorial representations of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, leader of the Jacobite movement and grandson of the exiled King James II-VII.[3] The portrait attributed to William Mosman in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery and the full-length portrait by Edward Gill (private collection) are now among the most famous depictions of the tartan-clad Prince which contributed to the process of turning the sitter into an icon of Scottish identity. In the 1740s, some of the painted or engraved portraits of Charles Edward Stuart enjoyed widespread currency across Jacobite material culture. The portrait by Allan Ramsay, and the engraving by Robert Strange after it, was probably the most popular visual representation of the Young Pretender. Indeed, it was reproduced on a variety of objects with, in general, amendments to the rendering of his dress. Charles Edward

[3] For more on the pictorial representation of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, see Robin Nicholson, *Bonnie Prince Charlie and the Making of a Myth. A Study in Portraiture, 1720-1892*, London, Associated University Press, 2002.

Stuart was often represented wearing the tartan and the plaid as can be noted, for example, on the Jacobite tumbler and on the snuffbox in the collection of the National Museums of Scotland. Yet the earliest pictorial representation of the Prince in tartan was not produced by his supporters but by his opponents on an anti-Jacobite image by Richard Cooper, now known as the 'wanted poster'. Thus through Jacobite and anti-Jacobite visual and material culture Highland clothing gave Jacobitism a cohesive identity.

The Disarming Act was repealed in 1782 but before that date, the Highland dress had already started to be rehabilitated. Its role as a symbol of Scottish identity was further enhanced and, from the last quarter of the eighteenth century, it expressed values of loyalty and courage. The Highlanders and their culture, long perceived as a threat, were from then on considered as devoted British citizens willing to die to defend Britain and its Empire. Indeed after 1745, a great number of Highlanders enlisted in the British army and the Highland regiments participated in all the conflicts involving Britain, in Europe but also in North America. They were celebrated for their bravery, their strength and their skill. The full length-portrait of Colonel William Gordon painted in Rome in 1766 by Pompeo Batoni, during the Colonel's Grand Tour[4], perfectly illustrates the evolution of the symbolic of the tartan and the plaid in this new military context. Gordon, standing in front of the Colosseum, is depicted wearing his uniform of the 105th Regiment of Foot. His tartan plaid is reminiscent of the Roman toga and suggests the sitter's interest in Antiquity, which he had in common with the other British Grand Tourists. It also stresses the sitter's national identity and, combined with his martial air, it presents Gordon as a defender of the British Empire.

Walter Scott and the Highland dress: the symbol of Scottish identity from 1822?

The third and last stage of the rehabilitation of the Highland dress consisted in using this garb to reify Scottishness as a form of collective national identity. Indeed, in 1822, on the occasion of the first official royal visit since 1650, this apparel became that of the entire nation and not of just one region. With his novels and poems, as well as the celebrations he orchestrated for the visit of King George IV, Sir Walter Scott played

[4] In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Grand Tour was an educational trip across western Europe which was mainly undertaken by upper-class young men from northern Europe.

a major role in the adoption of the tartan and in the forging of a new Scottish identity which stressed the role of Scotland as a distinct but equal partner to England within Great Britain. The various ceremonies organized for the King, including a Highland ball, symbolically marked the Scots' recognition of George IV as rightful monarch for Scotland. Sir David Wilkie was one of the artists who painted works commemorating the visit. He painted two pictures for the King. One of them shows a scene taking place at Holyrood Palace. The 10th Duke of Hamilton, who is incidentally wearing a kilt, is kneeling in front of the King to present him the key to the palace which had been the residence of Scottish monarchs for centuries. The other painting by Wilkie is a portrait of George IV in the Highland dress he wore for the levee organised at Holyrood palace. The 'plaided panorama' (p. 261), to re-use Coltman's terms to describe the events stage managed by Scott, were not unanimously approved and artists, such as Charles Williams, made fun of the King's unprepossessing appearance when wearing a kilt. Paradoxically if Scott contributed to turn the tartan and the kilt into symbols of Scottish national identity and to the popularity of the Highlands as a tourist destination, he is not represented wearing the Highland dress in the numerous painted and sculpted portraits executed during his lifetime. Instead, in most cases, he is represented as a Borders bard, wearing contemporary clothes with a maud or border plaid draped over a shoulder, thus reasserting his regional identity.

The evolution of Scottish identity between 1745 and 1832 has already been investigated in several publications, but by focusing on its visual and material representations, Viccy Coltman's book tackles a complex issue from a different perspective. Both her approach and her conclusions on the subject are original as, with the example of the pictorial representations of Walter Scott, she convincingly demonstrates that, contrary to received wisdom, Scotland did not have two but three distinct regional cultures and identities corresponding to the geographical territories of the Borders, the Lowlands and the Highlands. By examining the perception of the Scots in the world and then by comparing it to the image the Scots had of themselves and the way they wanted to be seen, the structure of the book gives the reader a complete picture of the evolution of the representation of Scottish identity over the period under scrutiny. Thus, this beautiful volume, on glossy paper, and containing numerous colour plates, is a major addition to the existing literature on the subject.

Published in *booksandideas*, 15 Sept. 2021.