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**WRITERS AND INTELLECTUALS ON BRITAIN AND EUROPE,  
1918–2018**

# Scottish Internationalisms at the 1938 Empire Exhibition: Between Britain, Europe, and Empire

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The 1938 British Empire Exhibition held in Glasgow was the last of its kind, a spectacular event that celebrated the British Empire and sought to bring global attention to Scotland. The exhibition was a celebration of empire at a time when anti-imperial movements were growing in strength across the globe, and a hopeful expression of peaceful world unity at a time when war seemed increasingly inevitable. This essay considers the ambivalences at the heart of this exhibition through readings of various literary responses to it in contemporary journals, the popular press, and ephemera. It argues for the particular significance of the location for the exhibition, positing the 1938 British Empire Exhibition as a cultural event that suggests Scotland's complex negotiation of various international networks and identities as well as its ambivalent place in Britain, Europe. Glasgow, 1938 becomes a significant place and time to view the emergence of modern Britain.

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In 'Birthday Poem' (1970), the British poet and critic Ian Hamilton remembers his dying father keeping an 'Empire Exhibition shaving mug' as a 'spittoon,' biting its 'gilded china mouth' and staining its 1938 inscription with 'droppings of ... blood.' Hamilton's poem commemorates his father's illness and death, but the birthday alluded to in the title is that of the poet, who was born in 1938, the same year that a British Empire Exhibition was held in Glasgow's Bellahouston Park. Hamilton connects this supposedly illustrious public event with personal death and decay, and a breach between generations. The commemorative shaving mug is both a defensive weapon – the father holds it 'tight in [his] hands' and 'wait[s] for attack' – and debased memento – it is 'bloated,' 'stained,' and redolent of deception. More broadly, it serves as a cultural emblem of an almost forgotten occasion, an uncomfortable reminder of a troubling year in Scottish, European, and world history, and, finally, a tarnished souvenir of a lost empire, one that was faltering even as the exhibition opened its doors to welcome the world to Glasgow in 1938.

In this essay I refer back to the 1938 British Empire Exhibition as a cultural event that suggests Scotland's complex negotiation of various international networks and identities as well as its ambivalent place in Britain, Europe, and the empire. In so doing, I seek to move beyond Hamilton's evocation of the exhibition as a tawdry symbol of decay and staleness, and instead consider how Bellahouston opens up a dizzying array of views on the emergence of modern Britain. The exhibition took place at a significant moment of crisis, both for Britain's crumbling imperial project and for European stability. When the gates of Bellahouston Park closed in October 1938, the exhibition was proclaimed in the popular press as 'an historic event' in a 'year we will remember for all time' (Weir 1938). However, when World War Two broke out less than twelve months later, the exhibition's promises of peace and international unity seemed hopelessly out of date, and, by the end of the war, the empire itself was living on borrowed time. The Glasgow exhibition was overshadowed by dire world events and is now mostly forgotten. Nonetheless it exposed the currents that connected modern Scotland to Britain, Europe, and the empire, even as it, ultimately, was overwhelmed by them. Remembered and re-examined from our contemporary perspective, the exhibition reveals the ideological underpinnings of an imperial

project that was always both central to Britain's identity and deeply intertwined with ideas about internationalism, particularly Britain's complicated relationship with Europe. Bellahouston sought to offer its visitors a glimpse of a globally-minded modern Scotland with a prosperous future; in retrospect, it shows us a world on the brink of upheaval and evokes provocative possibilities for alternative histories.

The 1938 exhibition was the last of its kind, providing a curious bookend to the long list of imperial exhibitions that had taken place over the past century. While large scale international exhibitions became popular in the nineteenth century, the twentieth century was, as Clennell Wilkinson affirms in *The London Mercury*, 'the age of exhibitions,' each larger and more ambitious than any that preceded them (1924).<sup>1</sup> Modern exhibitions are most commonly seen primarily as 'commercial or political propaganda' machines for the empire (Greenhalgh 1988: 16) and uncomfortable examples of 'mass entertainment promoted by modernist aesthetics' (Emery 2007: 55). Whilst these responses are certainly accurate, they risk also being incomplete: what is perhaps most interesting about the exhibitions of the modernist era (and, indeed, what distinguishes them from their Victorian predecessors) is the way in which their propaganda efforts frequently fail to convince and how, in their very failures, they become valuable cultural barometers for transitional times.

Roland Robertson suggests a historical timeline that places the 1938 exhibition right in the middle of the 'struggle-for-hegemony' phase (from the 1920s to the 1960s) of globalisation (Robertson 1992).<sup>2</sup> This period, Robertson argues, was marked by 'disputes and wars about the fragile terms of the globalization process established by the end of the [previous] take-off period' as well as conflicting concepts of modernity (Robertson 1992: 59). The general sense of imperial crisis was a key element of these transitional times and there was also a European dimension, not only because European imperialism has always been connected to internal European

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<sup>1</sup> Examples include the 1901 Pan-American Exposition, the 1924 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, Chicago's Century of Progress in 1933, and the 1937 Paris Expo.

<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, Robertson briefly addresses the rise of international exhibitions in the mid-nineteenth century, which he notes 'link localities on an international ... basis.' See 'Glocalisation' (1995) in *Global Modernities*, 36.

power struggles but also because struggles for hegemony occurred across Europe, concurrently with debates around the future of Europe as an elusive cultural and political entity. For a Britain on the brink of multiple historical shifts, exhibitions provided what Alfred Zimmern, writing about the 1924 British Empire Exhibition, termed 'a convenient occasion for a process of imperial stocktaking' (Zimmern 1924: 588), and were seen by some as a valuable opportunity to rethink international relations and global responsibilities.

Modern exhibitions did not so much display the world as attempt to create a new version of it that was in line with the imperial ethos of the organisers. Exhibitions, Tony Bennett argues, are 'object lessons in ... the power to command and arrange things and bodies for public display' (Bennett 2005: 60). Moreover, empire exhibitions not only demonstrate the power of individual display objects, but also seek to collect up, organise, and display a version of the whole world that pretends to be complete and stable. Caroline Levine's theorisation of forms is useful for understanding the form, function, and affordances of the modern exhibition. Levine argues that forms '*do political work in particular historical instances*' (Levine 2015: 5, emphasis in original) and suggests that 'formalist analysis turns out to be as valuable to understanding sociopolitical institutions as it is to reading literature. Forms are at work everywhere' (2). Her work centres on the affordances, both intended and latent, of form (i.e. what forms are '*capable of doing*' [6]). As structures which purport to represent and give shape to a particular version of the world (in this case the British Empire), exhibitions are in some ways pure form, and, in Levine's terms, they most obviously correspond to the form of 'wholes' in their aim to contain, arrange, and display a world to an audience of spectators. Levine addresses the 'unifying power' of a whole with the 'capacity to hold together disparate parts': there is an 'effective homology between the bounded wholeness' of the exhibition and the 'bounded wholeness' of the empire (24–25). Yet, while the representation of a coherent imperial whole might be the intended affordance of the empire exhibition, it is also true, as Levine reminds us, that 'aesthetic forms never actually achieve a bounded wholeness' and they cannot, moreover, ever be 'separated from the social worlds of [their] creation and reception' (24). Moreover, there are also latent affordances that invite different kinds

of engagements, meetings, and meanings within the frame of the exhibition grounds. We might remember here Ian Hamilton's father's empire exhibition shaving mug. In Derridean terms, the mug can be understood as both a supplement to and substitute for the exhibition, one which, like the empire exhibition, accrues simultaneous, even conflicting, affordances.

I am interested in not only the 1938 exhibition itself but also the various narratives that circulated around the exhibition in periodicals, the popular press, and other ephemera as well as the literary responses by a surprising number of contemporary writers and artists, from Neil Gunn to Edwin Morgan. This expanded story of exhibition culture provides a complex cultural map of Scotland in the late 1930s. Taken together, these materials suggest that the empire exhibition represented various, sometimes conflicting, contemporary Scottish, British, European, and empire identities. They also reveal Scotland's struggle to locate and promote itself on a world stage.

### **From Bellahouston to Brexit Britain**

The 1938 Empire Exhibition had over 100 palaces and pavilions for 'Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Ireland, Southern Rhodesia, Burma, and over 30 of the Colonies and Dependencies' ('Scotland's Empire Exhibition' 1938). Other buildings included a model highland village, a Palace of Arts, a concert hall, and a cinema (see 'Empire Exhibition' at *The Glasgow Story* at <https://www.theglasgowstory.com/image/?inum=TGSA00401>, accessed 29<sup>th</sup> April 2020). Visitors to the exhibition could traverse the central thoroughfares of Colonial Avenue and Dominions Avenue, at either end of which lay large Palaces of Engineering and Industry. They could visit the two Scottish Pavilions on Scottish Avenue which showcased attractions including a 25-foot statue of St Andrew as a young man and 'life-size figures of famous scots' ('Scotland's Empire Exhibition'), an exhibition on witchcraft and a display of Scottish books. The Canadian Pavilion boasted the 'biggest illuminated map in the Empire, covering 600 square feet' and the South African Pavilion offered 'Native handicrafts,' diamonds, and ostrich feathers ('Scotland's Empire Exhibition'). Visitors could hear music in the bandstand or spend time in the Amusement Park which was advertised

as the ‘finest and most up-to-date in Britain’ with ‘an airplane ride that will give the sensation of actual flying’ (‘Scotland’s Empire Exhibition’). They could grab a meal at the Atlantic Restaurant, which was designed to resemble a transatlantic liner, or sample herring, porridge, carrageen (sea-weed custard), crowdie, and oatmeal bannocks in the highland tearoom. Michael John Law notes the modernist style of the exhibition which would have been notably distinct from the architecture of Glasgow at the time: the exhibition showcased ‘a series of long low buildings’ but also the use of ‘pastel colours such as primrose, cerise, coral and poppy’ which did not strictly accord with modernist style (Law 2017: 34). The central feature of the exhibition was the 300-foot Tait Tower which had a lift to the top from where visitors could look over the exhibition and the surrounding suburbs of Glasgow, as well as – on the rare clear day – out towards the Highlands.

The 1938 exhibition was an avowedly ‘Empire affair’ (‘Handbook for Exhibitors’ 1938). Yet, while it aimed to paint a happy picture of imperial unity and international peace, it instead reveals a fraught global community in a moment of transformation, and raises complex questions about Scotland’s national and cultural identity, as well as its position in various overlapping international communities. The exhibition took place at a time when anti-imperial movements were growing both at home and abroad, and when the empire was visibly shrinking. As Priyamvada Gopal notes, ‘extensive anti-colonial networks’ were developing in the interwar period and drawing ‘inspiration and strategies’ from one another (Gopal 2019: 210). At the same time the exhibition can usefully be put in the context of a resurgent, and perhaps correlative, popular imperialism during the interwar years.<sup>3</sup> The historian Stuart Ward (2017) suggests how Britain retreats to nostalgic dreams of empire at moments of uncertainty. When Ward describes how ‘the embers of empire are still routinely and sometimes explicitly evoked as an ethereal presence, beckoning a divided nation back into the world,’ he addresses our own Brexit era where a new nostalgia for empire is visible and a new passion for commonwealth connections is

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<sup>3</sup> For further discussion on this historical context see, for example, *Imperial Britain: The Empire in British Politics, c. 1880–1932* (2002) by Andrew S. Thompson.

proclaimed, but he also provides an apt description of the cultural climate around the 1938 exhibition.<sup>4</sup>

The 1930s were a period which saw intense debate around both imperial and European identity. As a product and cultural barometer of its time, the Glasgow exhibition helps us understand the ways in which legacy of empire is both central to Britain's identity and deeply intertwined with its relationship with Europe. According to Mark Hewitson and Matthew D'Auria (2015), 'defining and understanding the "European soul" became central in all cultural and intellectual milieux' in the interwar period; they contend that 'such debates stemmed' both 'from the immediate need to banish the risk of a new war and, more fundamentally, from the urge to avoid the complete destruction of European civilization' (1). As Benjamin Kohlmann and Matthew Taunton (2019) note, 'the 1930s are again en vogue,' seemingly providing a 'resonant backdrop to current historical events' (1). While I concur with Kohlmann and Taunton's warning against 'attempts to instrumentalise the 1930s for contemporary political debates,' they convincingly define the 1930s as 'a key transformational moment in the cultural and literary history of the twentieth-century' (2). If we see the 1930s as a period during which various, often conflicting, ideas about the possibilities and perils of internationalism were modelled and debated, then we can better understand both the cultural narratives that we have inherited and the alternative possibilities that we have left behind.

The debates surrounding Britain's last empire exhibition in 1938 reveal and reflect Britain's difficult and incomplete transition from outward looking imperial power to an inward looking post-imperial nation unsure about (or unhappy with) its place in the world, and remind us, moreover, of a legacy of empire that has never quite been laid to rest. I use the terms 'inward' and 'outward' looking with caution here as helpful, albeit oversimplified, categories for sketching out the historical shifts taking place in this period. The dichotomy between outward and inward looking becomes

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<sup>4</sup> Some of this nostalgia is reflected in a spate of films and television programmes about the empire that appear in this period, including, for example, *Viceroy's House*, or what political scientist Andrew Dougall has termed the 'Commonwealth pivot' enacted by certain brexiteers.

usefully complicated when we take into account that even an avowedly outward-looking event like an empire exhibition also reveals national and local anxieties and interests, just as an inward-looking event like Brexit is also about Britain's place in the world. Furthermore, neither of these categories are themselves monolithic: discussions about the British empire cannot be separated from the nation's troubled attitude towards alternative models of internationalism, including but not limited to the European Union, nor can they be disentangled from debates about the borders of the nation itself.

Considering former Prime Minister Theresa May's proposal, in 2018, for a post-Brexit Festival of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, it is surely valuable to re-consider the cultural work of exhibitions, what they intentionally display, what they accidentally reveal, and what they try to hide.<sup>5</sup> We might recall, for example, the pageant at the opening ceremony for the 2012 Olympic Games in London which is now invoked nostalgically as evidence of a lost welcoming, global, pre-Brexit Britain. The much-mocked proposed Festival of Britain, provisionally scheduled to be held in 2022, has been heralded by the director Martin Green (who was in charge of the London Olympic ceremonies) as an opportunity for 'joy, hope and happiness,' a celebration of 'creativity,' and an occasion for 'healing and coming together' (Brown 2020). Yet, it has also been condemned as a 'cringe-inducing festival of patriotism' (Brown 2020) and provoked criticism for the fact that it will coincide with the anniversary of the Irish Civil War. In a 2019 report by the thinktank British Future entitled 'Why We Should Postpone the "Festival of Britain"' Sunder Katwala calls this 'the worst possible timing,' continuing, 'it is only likely to heighten tensions between communities – and that's before we know Brexit's implications for the border. Right across the UK, a festival so closely associated with Brexit may only reinforce divides when it could be bridging them.'

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<sup>5</sup> At the 2018 Conservative conference Theresa May announced a Festival of Britain modelled on the 1951 national exhibition of the same name, which would celebrate the 'best of British,' bring communities together and 'strengthen our precious union.'

Theresa May was inspired by the 1951 Festival of Britain, but the planned exhibition, designed to strengthen what May calls 'our precious union' (Devenport), at a time of international crisis and national division, also echoes the 1938 exhibition. Both are exhibitions designed to promote British unity that ironically draw attention to the fractured nature, and the disputed internal and external borders, of the United Kingdom. They signal furthermore that narratives of European, imperial, or commonwealth identity are not set outside the bounds of the nation but are rather central to the territorial and cultural fabric of Britain itself. Indeed, the Glasgow exhibition is a vital historical precedent because it also spotlights the complicated relationship amongst the constituent parts of the United Kingdom. In a post-Brexit political climate Scotland is questioning its position with the rest of the United Kingdom and asserting its ties to Europe and, in 1938, the exhibition explored what the views of the United Kingdom, the empire, Europe, and the world were from the perspective of Scotland.

### **The Edge, the Hinge, and the Network**

At a moment when British culture seems to be preoccupied with the Second World War and the lost empire, I suggest that we go back a little further – to 1938 – and we look a little askance<sup>6</sup> – to consider the view from Scotland. Before returning in more detail to the 1938 exhibition, I first offer a brief selection of textual and critical examples that help frame Scotland's place in and significance to Britain, Europe, and the empire, and suggest why Scotland 1938 might be a significant place from which to view the emergence of modern Britain. The following examples offer three distinct, but related metaphorical models (each evoking different forms with various affordances) for imagining national and international relationships: the edge, the hinge, and the network.

In the journalist Madeline Bunting's 2016 autobiographical travel narrative, *Love of Country: A Hebridean Journey*, she begins looking at the Hebrides on a map in her London home, describing the islands as 'tiny specks far to the west, the last volcanic

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<sup>6</sup> In his book *Looking Askance* (2004), Michael Leja defines 'looking askance' as a way of learning to think critically about the image and thus the world.

remnant before we tip off the continental shelf, leave Europe and head out into the open ocean for the Americas.' She plots her journey 'out to the edge' (5). Written immediately after the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and published just before the 2016 Brexit referendum, Bunting's book is a personal meditation on what it means to be British in the twenty-first century. Bunting embarks on her travels around Scotland, she writes, 'in the hope of knowing and understanding where I could call home' and also to 'define ... where the boundaries [of home] lie' (5). For Bunting, the Western Isles of Scotland are simultaneously representative of the heart of Britain and culturally, imaginatively, and geographically on the edge. Bunting notes the long history of idealising Gaelic culture: 'The Gael of the Hebrides' she says, represents 'everything that ... urban industrial Britain was not,' both romantically constructed as the 'noble savage' that stands outside and in opposition to European modernity and idealised as the spiritual heart of modern civilisation (127). Bunting thus sets up a debate between core and periphery that is central to modern conceptions of Britishness. The book is structured by her journeys increasingly northwards. *Love of Country* ends on St Kilda, the abandoned Scottish archipelago 310 miles from the mainland, which she describes as the place where 'the [European] continent stops abruptly in cliffs.' Significantly, Bunting's book begins and ends with images of cliff edges: she travels 'out to the edge' of the nation-state and the continent as if to get a better view of Britain as a whole at an uncertain time in its history, a time when Britain is, it seems, falling off the edge of Europe 'into that blue space on the map' (5).

Bunting repeatedly situates Scotland as the farthest edge of Britain and Europe, but also somehow at the heart of both. The Scottish poet and intellectual provocateur Hugh MacDiarmid offers us a different but comparable model. His 1950 essay, 'The Quality of Scots Internationalism,' begins by quoting an unnamed essayist writing on John Knox in the *Times Literary Supplement*:

Scotland [we read] had always occupied a larger place in events than her population, or, let us be frank—her earlier achievements, wholly justified. She lay, a hard nut to crack, in the hinge between the cultures of the Baltic and of the Mediterranean. She was always conscious both of the negation of the

ice (her northern coast looks out towards no further shore) and of the fruitful southern lands, with which she also had kinship... Scotland was a microcosm of Europe, in a sense the great fenced, fertile self-centred metropolitan country of England, to the south, never was... (1969 [1950]: 111)

Scotland is contrasted with England: while the latter is 'fenced' and self-contained, the former is a 'microcosm' of Europe. Scotland is defined by its coasts and linked by its North Sea to two different seas – the Baltic and the Mediterranean. The conception of Scotland here is primarily metaphorical, for, after all, England is also linked by its coasts to the Mediterranean and Baltic seas. Here Scotland's positionality is imagined not with the image of the edge but rather the related metaphors of the 'nut' and the 'hinge.' The hinge recalls the more familiar metaphor of the bridge which suggests links between different, even incompatible spaces and concepts. Yet, as Irene Ramalho Santos (2003) notes, the metaphor of the bridge tends to assume that 'such bridges and comparisons occur between integral, preconstituted entities' (4). The model of the hinge goes further than the metaphor of the bridge, suggesting both interconnectedness and contingency; it also evokes the possibilities of closing and opening. Scotland is a 'hard nut to crack,' suggesting the hinge as a nutcracker which fails to fully open up or reveal the secrets of Scottish culture. Nonetheless, as Scotland lies 'in the hinge,' it becomes a mobile link between northern and southern Europe.

MacDiarmid goes on to note 'the fact of the matter is, of course, that Scotland's dispersion of her people and their influence is not confined to Europe, but is world-wide. There are over twenty million people of Scots extraction abroad, and only about five million in Scotland itself' (111–112). Elsewhere, MacDiarmid has speculated on 'the very different course not only Scottish and English, but world history would have taken if the whole of the mainland of Scotland had been severed from England and broken up into the component islands of a numerous archipelago' (MacDiarmid 1939: 7–8). Jed Esty (2003) uses the model of the 'shrinking island' to describe what he sees as the increasingly insular nature of 1930s Britain and the literature it produced, and Robert Eaglestone (2018) has noted that the fragment from John Donne's Meditation XVII which declares that 'no man is an island' was 'widely cited

.. and circulated' after the Brexit referendum (6). As John Brannigan reminds us in his work on *Archipelagic Modernism* (2014), the archipelagos of the British Isles have at times been imagined as a fortress, an enclave, and a retreat, but, while the sea has been what cut Britain off, it is also what has connected it to a larger a world. MacDiarmid's archipelagic Scotland is not isolated, insular, and abandoned but rather fertile, pluralistic, and outward looking; defined not by separate landmasses, but rather by the channels of water that connect coastal ports.

Both Bunting and MacDiarmid attempt to understand Scotland by paying attention to the nation's borders, connections, and affiliations. As Berthold Schoene (2007) notes, 'discontinuity and adaptability have become Scotland's cultural trademarks' (9). Such a cultural paradigm of overlapping subgroups and multiple international connections recollects T. S. Eliot's call in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) for 'a common world culture which will yet not diminish the particularity of its constituent parts' (62). While in many of his writings, Eliot was ambivalent about the possibility or even value of a politically united Europe, Melba Cuddy-Keane (2010) observes his perhaps surprisingly 'pluralistic model' here of a unified world with diverse sub-groups and cross-divisions.<sup>7</sup> Cuddy-Keane reminds us that, for Eliot, 'constant friction among these sub-groups is not only ... unavoidable; it is necessary to prevent the entrenchment of either isolated factions or an oppressive totalitarian unit' (170). 'Excess of unity ... may lead to tyranny,' Eliot suggests, but so too may 'excess of divisions.' Writing in *The Voice of Scotland* in 1938, the poet William Soutar argues, in terms strikingly similar to Eliot's, that 'we live in a period of transition and disintegration' and advocates that 'in a transitional period there are temporary loyalties which are necessities for faith' (1[1]: 22). Following this paradigm Scotland can be imagined in relation to Britain, to its northern community, to its European neighbours, to its American allies, to the Scottish diaspora, and to the commonwealth. This is an international network of shifting connections and conflicting loyalties, and one that recognises, moreover, a complex and diverse world.

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<sup>7</sup> Jason Harding (2002), Ann-Marie Einhaus (2018) and others have noted Eliot's problematic reliance on right-wing Christianity or classical antiquity as models for a unified European culture. Moreover, in 'The Unity of European Culture' (1946) Eliot distinguishes between cultural and political unity.

These metaphors of edges, hinges, and networks provide useful models for thinking about the diverse cultural formations and functions of the empire exhibition. The 1938 Empire Exhibition was at times imaginatively situated at the edge of both Britain and the empire, and at other times aimed to be a hinge between various models of nationalism and internationalism. To return to Caroline Levine's theory for a moment, the exhibition can thus be imagined not as a 'whole' but rather as a network in that it offered models of connectivity and 'patterns of interconnection and exchange' (Levine 2015: 113). I propose not one single formal model for the exhibition but rather several that can sit alongside one another, positing the 1938 exhibition as a nexus point, albeit perhaps an accidental one, for circulating and contesting views on national identity, and imperial and international relations.

### **The View From Scotland, 1938**

Margery Palmer McCulloch calls 1938, 'that critical year,' citing it as a moment of political crises for the Scottish literary community (McCulloch 2009: 109). As the exhibition was taking place, to cite just two examples given by McCulloch, the writer Catherine Carswell was trying to organise a settlement scheme for refugees fleeing Nazi persecution, and the writers and translators Edwin and Willa Muir were openly decrying what they saw as the shame of Munich. While Scottish literature has at times been dismissed as local, vernacular, provincial, and marginal, Emma Dymock and Margery McCulloch argue that as the Scottish Literary Renaissance emerged in the post-World War One period, 'internationalism was the inseparable other side of the nationalist coin' (Dymock and McCulloch 2011: 2). McCulloch, Dymock, and others have valuably opened out connections between Scottish modernism and other world literatures, showing how much Scottish modernism was always European, if not more broadly international.<sup>8</sup> At the same time as Scotland was looking out at the world, there was also a renewed interest in Scotland, and particularly the Western Isles, in the 1930s, as evidenced by a slew of travel narratives about Scotland published during this period. These include Louis MacNeice's *I Crossed the Minch* (1938), Cicely Hamilton's *Modern Scotland as Seen by An Englishwoman* (1937), and MacDiarmid's

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Carla Sassi (2011) and Eleanor Bell (2004).

own quasi-autobiographical travelogue *The Islands of Scotland* (1939). In *The Islands of Scotland*, MacDiarmid declares that 'it is impossible to write about the Scottish islands today without ... recognizing civilisation's urgent need today to refresh and replenish itself at its original sources' (ix). However, such a veneration of lost authenticity must also be reconciled with the fact that, in the 1930s, Scotland was one of the fastest-growing industrial areas of Europe. 'Scotland,' wrote Cicely Hamilton, 'is an object-lesson more striking than any other European country' of the 'migrations and upheavals brought about by the Machine Age' (1937: 2). It is in these complex literary and cultural environs, and particularly in the context of Scotland's sense of itself as a European nation with an international outlook, that we have to understand both the Glasgow exhibition, and the cultural and political currents that eddied through it.

As a jingoistic celebration of and advertisement for the British Empire, the Exhibition already seemed anachronistic and certainly out of step with the more pluralistic or politically urgent forms of internationalism fermenting concurrently in the literary community. There was an idealistic desire for a direct connection 'between foreigners and the people of Scotland' (*Glasgow Herald*, 3 May 1938); as Glasgow looked out at the globe and imagined the globe looking back, the *Herald* declared it to be 'the most cosmopolitan city in the country' (7 May 1938). At the same time, however, the exhibition's vision of commonwealth cosmopolitanism was predominantly white: many of the hotels in Glasgow refused non-white guests, including the black American singer and actor Paul Robeson who had difficulty finding accommodation for his visit (Crampsey 1988: 67). The 1938 exhibition also included stereotypical but by that time controversial and outdated celebrations of the colonial exotic, including, for example, the much advertised 'giraffe necked ladies' and the tent for 'Savage West Africa.' 'Anyone who has wandered about the Empire Exhibition at Bellahouston would think that the British Empire was a federation of happy and prosperous and contented nations and that everything in the imperial garden was lovely,' a 1938 editorial in the Socialist newspaper *Forward* warned, drawing attention instead to the 'hundreds of millions of natives' who live 'under the heel of the exploiter.' The exhibition was overshadowed by news of anti-empire

riots in Jamaica and undermined by India and Ceylon's refusal to participate, and anti-empire exhibitions sprung up in public and trade union halls, offering to reveal 'what you won't see at the Empire Exhibition' (Keys 1938).

The organisers of and audiences for the exhibition wondered what exactly it meant to look at the empire from Scotland and to look over or back at Scotland from the empire. There was, for some, a fierce pride that the Scots 'made the Empire' (Gibb 1938: 30–31); the Pageant of Empire celebrated the story of 'Empire Building by Scots' and the Scottish diaspora (specifically imagined as Canadian, American, or Antipodean) were welcomed back to their ancestral home. The writer Neil Gunn wrote 'A Scots Welcome' (1938) in the lifestyle magazine *The Scottish Field*, hailing those who came back from 'the colonies' to 'the soil that nourished the ancient root,' although he sardonically noted that 'all Colonial visitors may not boast some Scottish blood! There are many of us who may be prepared politely to say that they are none the worst for that' (20). There was a keen awareness that, for good and bad, Glasgow's wealth, power, and prosperity had come from a history of empire trade of such items as tobacco, cotton, jute, and linen in the eighteenth century, and a fear about what the disintegration of that trade might mean for Glasgow and Scotland as a whole. On the other hand, instances of imperial jingoism contrasted sharply with a fear that Scotland's 'imperialist aggression' lay 'contrary to her national idealism' (Wood 1938: 15) *The Voice of Scotland* (the journal that MacDiarmid returned to co-edit in 1938) declared that 'the working class policy ought to be to break up the Empire to avert war and enable the workers to triumph in every country and colony. Scottish separation is part of the process of England's Imperial disintegration and is a help towards the ultimate triumph of the workers of the world' (Grieve 1938: 8). There was an uneasy awareness that Scotland identified with the colonised as well as the coloniser.

Criticisms of the empire (and the exhibition) can also be connected to a yearning to belong to a different, more egalitarian kind of international community. The writer Edwin Scouller offered a view of working class internationalism untethered to nationalism when he argued that 'improved transport and communications, cosmopolitan finance, the cinema, wireless, and a hundred other agencies are softening the lines of demarcation between the Chinese coolie and the Leith docker'

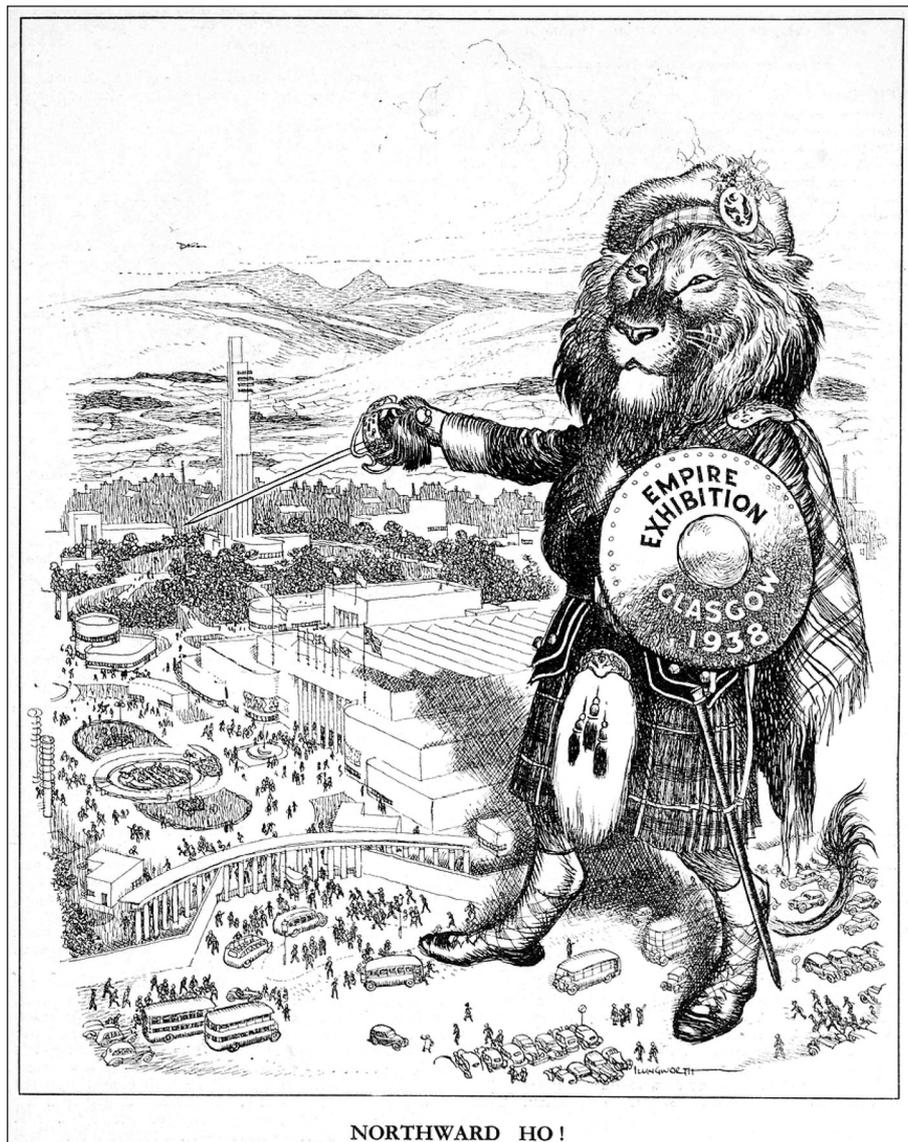
(Scouller 1936: 79–80). A June 1936 article in the journal *Outlook* (a journal formed when *The Modern Scot* merged with *The Scottish Standard* in 1936)<sup>9</sup> suggests the importance of small nations such as Scotland in international networks such as the British commonwealth and the League of Nations, and advocates, in terms that continue to resonate with Scottish politics today, for ‘the ideal of independent nationhood and common co-operation’ (9–10). This alternative international community could be specifically European. In October 1936, *Outlook* found it ‘impossible to accept the conclusion that foreign affairs are no concern of Scotland’ and launched a series of articles on the ‘foreign policies of the major European nations’ that concluded with ‘an outline of the part which a self-governing Scotland might play in the turmoil of Europe’ (11). The novelist Dot Allan articulated her scepticism about ‘the Scots Renaissance movement and other rallied movements, which, in my opinion, tend to cut us off from the rest of the world,’ arguing, ‘I think, in fact, that a United States of Europe wouldn’t be at all a bad idea, and there doesn’t seem to be any reason why it wouldn’t work’ (qtd. in Burgess 1989: 133). As Gerard Delanty and others have noted, there were also different visions of what a united Europe might look like: while the idea of *Mitteleuropa* was particularly appealing to European nations without colonies outside the continent (Delanty 1995: 104), concepts of pan-Europeanism were not necessarily incommensurate with other forms of international community and were particularly appealing to smaller nations such as Scotland. These ideas were all circulating in the period leading up to the 1938 exhibition, and the exhibition became an occasion for intensified debate about internationalism at the same time as revealing Scotland’s conflicting loyalties.

The question of Scotland’s relationship to various possible international communities also provoked related questions regarding Scotland’s place within Britain itself. A picture in *Punch* (**Figure 1**) shows an enormous lion, recalling the Lion Rampant of Scotland (an image used in official exhibition marketing material) but more similar in rendering to the oft-evoked lion of the British Empire. Bekilted and attired in full Scottish regalia, the lion looks down over a small-scale Empire

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<sup>9</sup> For more details, see, Tom Normand, *The Modern Scot: Modernism and Nationalism in Scottish Art, 1928–1955*. Routledge, 2017.

Exhibition. Tiny human figures scurry around his feet, while he points his sword northwards with a beneficent expression on his face. In the background are the mountains of the highlands and there is even a small airplane circling above the exhibition's Tait Tower. The slogan underneath the illustration reads 'Northward Ho!', an invocation that both draws attention to Scotland and celebrates it.



**Figure 1:** Illingworth, Leslie. 4 May 1938, *Punch*. Reproduced with the permission of Punch Library/Top Foto.

Yet the Scottish papers complained about the English press ignoring the empire exhibition, with some suggesting that they did so because they were worried that the splendours of Bellahouston would show up the 1924 Wembley Exhibition. A 1938 editorial in *The London Mercury* argued that 'as Wembley stood for Britain in relation to the Empire, so the Glasgow Exhibition stands for Scotland (a part of Great Britain) in relation to the Empire.' The somewhat convoluted phrasing here reflects the uncertainty, even anxiety, over whether the exhibition should be considered British or Scottish and, indeed, what that distinction meant. To use Caroline Levine's formal models again, the Wembley and Glasgow exhibitions are two 'purported wholes' that, set side by side, suggest quite different visions of British and imperial identity. As Levine notes, the encounters between wholes can provide 'opportunities for new and emancipatory social formations' (45). Thus, one way of disrupting a whole is simply to produce '*more wholes*' (46). Whereas at Wembley, Scotland was an integrated and unrepresented part of an unexamined imperial centre, at Bellahouston, the picture of Britain was both more scrutinised and, as a result of such scrutiny, more complicated.

Holding the exhibition in Glasgow raised questions about Scotland's role in relation to both the British Empire as a whole and the constituent parts of the United Kingdom. There were separate pavilions for Britain and Scotland (in fact, there were two separate pavilions for Scotland, one of them a museum of Scottish history), as well as Northern Ireland and the recently created dominion of the Irish Free State. While the model of international neighbourliness imagined at Bellahouston could be condemned as facile and idealistic, it still worked to undo the established imperial hierarchy and attempted to link up Scotland with a broader world. The exhibition created a new map of the commonwealth, an international network that did not depend upon the imperial centre. Indeed, at Bellahouston, Britain's place as the imperial centre became subject to scrutiny, as did the borders of and fractures within Britain itself. The exhibition turns our gaze back to the imperial centre, showing it to be subject to cracks and open to diversity.

At Bellahouston, both terms, *British* and *Empire*, came under pressure. The fact that it was a *British Empire* exhibition at all in Bellahouston in 1938 was due rather

more to political and economic expediency than any particular patriotic pride. The exhibition was seen as a much-needed opportunity for Scotland to raise its profile and self-esteem following a period of economic depression and high unemployment. While 4 of the 5 official aims of the exhibition regarded imperial interests, the final aim was 'to stimulate Scottish work and production.' In his 2018 book on the year 1938, Michael John Law reminds us that, after a long period of depression, Glasgow was really no longer a second city of empire. The exhibition, then, was part of a plan to put Glasgow back on the world stage at a time of general economic and cultural regeneration. Writing in *The Scottish Field* in 1938, the fashion journalist Elizabeth Ewing observed a new trend for tartan in London and Paris (**Figure 2**), declaring 'the Scottish influence is once again the mode [and] ... with people outside Scotland finding it smart and intriguing to copy us in small things and great – perhaps then we shall regain confidence ... and once again be a real influence in the world.'

Even so, as a 1938 article in *The Scots Magazine* put it, 'exhibition is closely tied with exhibitionism – one of Scotland's deadly sins.'

The exhibition was an occasion for Scotland to imagine different versions of its national story, from the romantic highland village to the industrial might of the modern, global, industrial nation. It also reveals an uncertainty about which model of internationalism to embrace – pan-European, socialist internationalism, commonwealth unity, or Anglo-American modernity. Law (2018) notes, 'In effect the exhibition had to engage with competing discourses on Scotland's past, its status as a nation, its imperial role and as an exemplar of modernity,' (32) and he concludes that 'the negotiation between traditional Scottish themes, imperial pride and modernity produced an uneven sense of identity in the exhibition (44).' Indeed, the exhibition seemed confused about which version of Scotland it wished to show to the world and, furthermore, in which world community it sought to claim membership.

This confusion is revealed in the two signal attractions of the exhibition: the clachan and Tait Tower. The model highland clachan featured a black house, big house, church, and smithy, with a painted backdrop of a highland scene, all presided over by a man purporting to be the King of St Kilda (see postcards of the Clachan at *The Glasgow Story* at <https://www.theglasgowstory.com/image/?inum=TGSA00392>,



**Figure 2:** Davidson, C. L. *The Scottish Field*, March 1938, p. 27. From the National Library of Scotland.

accessed 29<sup>th</sup> April 2020). The clachan, the second most popular attraction after a model of Victoria Falls, was situated not far from 'Savage West Africa,' a proximity perhaps not entirely incidental. A 1937 article in *Outlook* on the documentary-maker

John Grierson's 'proposals for the production and presentation of Scottish films in connection with the Empire Exhibition,' notes the possible incentive to the tourist trade of romantic depictions of Scotland. We read, 'The films of Bali ... have attracted thousands of Americans eager to view the "noble savage"; and while Scotland need not emphasise the "savage" aspect, films detailing the life of a Highland community ... could be made exceedingly attractive' (18). The exhibition authorities were quick to capitalise on this tourism opportunity – and to emphasise the 'noble' over the 'savage' – but, interestingly, the primary audience for the model clachan was Scottish, suggesting an uncertain nation performing its history and culture to itself.

At the same time, a great deal of emphasis was also placed on modernisation, with the 300-foot art deco Tower of Empire designed by Thomas Tait representing the future possibilities for a new, modern Scotland. The poet Edwin Morgan remembers the exhibition as the moment when 'modern style came to Glasgow for the first time' and applauds this as a European alternative to Anglo-American versions of modernity (Morgan 2004). While studying Russian at Glasgow University, Morgan had a season ticket to the exhibition and saw Tait's Tower as 'a modest cousin of Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International in Russia' (96–97). In contrast, Michael John Law (2018) reads the art deco tower as a symbol of Americanization. The contrasting observations of Morgan and Law reveal the very concept of 'modernity' to be up for debate on the exhibition grounds – did it mean socialist internationalism or American-style capitalist internationalism? *The Scotsman* decreed 'modernity' the 'keyword' of the exhibition, describing visitors to Bellahouston as 'projected forth into the kind of dream world which might materialise from the mind of H. G. Wells' (3 May 1938). As a 'dream world' the exhibition offered different dreams according to the desires of its visitors, the pastel-coloured pavilions a backdrop against which visitors could project their fantasies.

In his personal reminiscences, the Press Officer Alastair Borthwick (1988) portrays Bellahouston as a dream-space apart from the tensions of contemporary Europe. Borthwick describes a moment in September when Chamberlain made a report to the nation about the worsening political situation in Europe: 'The music from the loudspeakers stopped, and though there were thousands of people in the park there

was silence, only the old man's voice and the sound of the fountains. Then the music came up again and we were back to believing what we wanted to believe' (28). The utopian space of the exhibition was deliberately and, ultimately, jarringly out of sync with unpalatable contemporary political realities. Dreams of internationalism were increasingly at odds with nationalistic tensions. From the beginning, the exhibition was shadowed by growing political unrest in Europe. Even in the planning stages, there were concerns that 'one of the mad-dogs of Europe' might 'sli[p] his chains' before the exhibition could take place (*The Modern Scot*, 1936). Moreover, the opening of the Glasgow exhibition coincided with Mussolini's Augustan Exhibition of Romanità in Rome, to which Hitler was invited. Flavia Marcello (2011) describes Mussolini's exhibition as an attempt to forge a connection between 'a Roman past and a fascist present' (223). The exhibition proclaimed 'Europe's shared Roman heritage,' harking back to a time 'when almost all of Europe shared a single civilization' (Hell 2019: 315). These two exhibitions in Glasgow and Rome thus offer both rival versions of empire and contrasting visions for modern Europe. Amid rumours that Mussolini or Hitler might visit Glasgow, *Punch* (1938) joked that Bellahouston's 'trams [were] unsuited to the needs of the modern dictator', while 'the widening of the main gates to admit the simultaneous entry of the two distinguished guests would also present certain difficulties.'

The Glasgow exhibition aimed to be both structurally and symbolically inhospitable to 'the modern dictator.' An editorial in *The Scotsman* newspaper (1938) declared that the exhibition would be a vital contribution to a 'new Europe.' From 23<sup>rd</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> September 1938 a Congress for Peace and Empire held by the Scottish Peace Council, in conjunction with the International Peace Campaign and the National Peace Council, announced the 'decisive nature of the role that must be played by the peoples of the Empire in the re-establishment of world peace.' In conjunction with the League of Nations, the exhibition established a Peace Pavilion, the official guide to which stated that 'while nations are rearming and the press of the world is full of war, it is keenly felt by those who take an active interest in international affairs that wherever multitudes of people gather there should be, strikingly presented, some mark of the people's hope for peace centred upon the League.' Specially

commissioned League of Nations bells called visitors to the pavilion which they then exited through the Garden of the Good Neighbour.

Nonetheless, the political unrest in Europe increasingly encroached upon the space of the exhibition, both literally and metaphorically. After the Anschluss in March 1938, it felt increasingly inevitable that Europe was heading towards war. The special exhibition editions of newspapers became full of headlines about fear of war in Europe. As the summer went on, there were queues at the army and navy recruitment pavilion, and tanks and military equipment were put on display. Visitors would return home from visits to the Peace Pavilion and learn how to put on a gas mask. After air raid precautions were introduced, trenches were dug in Bellahouston Park. Less than a year after the exhibition closed, bombs were falling over the Clyde, and the former exhibition grounds were completely taken over by the war in Europe, quartering British soldiers, housing a transit camp for French troops and becoming a receiving station for (mostly) Italian prisoners of war.

### **Conclusion: Flying Over Bellahouston**

On the surface, the 1938 Empire Exhibition seems old-fashioned, wilfully utopian, and out of sync with the times. It built an idealised version of a traditional highland clachan during a period of mass migration to urban areas, and it modelled the industrial modernity of Scotland beside the worst slums in Britain. It advertised the British Empire even as it fell apart, and it created a Peace Pavilion with a Garden of the Good Neighbour as Europe lurched towards war. Bob Crampsey describes Bellahouston as looking the way 'Scotland might well have looked had the Forties been a peaceful decade' (127). The exhibition offered various visions of what Scotland might come to be – a resolutely modern nation connected to a thriving commonwealth, a proud enclave of traditional arts, crafts, and culture connected to a reinvigorated nationalism, and a beacon of internationalism with links to Europe, the League of Nations, and commonwealth. Yet none of these utopian versions of modern Scotland quite came to pass, and the exhibition represents instead a spectral alternative history.

Let me end then with one final image that seems to represent something of the contradictions of the 1938 empire exhibition. The airplanes that often flew low

over Bellahouston Park became a prevailing, lingering image of the exhibition. In the last week of the exhibition, three simulated air raids were held, with fighter planes swooping down low over the exhibition grounds and buzzing Tait Tower. At the closing ceremony, after Auld Lang Syne and the British national anthem had been sung, there was a final mock attack by the City of Glasgow RAF Squadron whose Hawker Hinds planes were 'driven off by artillery and search lights' (Crampsey 153). That this all happened in the middle of a heavy storm would have made the so-called entertainment even more apocalyptic. Marina MacKay (2019) reminds us that by the mid-1930s there was widespread awareness that aerial bombing was 'becoming the decisive feature of a new world war' (365). But the image of the airplane also retained its previous connotations of freedom and shifting perspectives, encapsulated at the exhibition by the airplane ride at the Amusement Park which promised to 'give the sensation of actual flying' (Crampsey 1988: 140). An exhibition pamphlet entitled *A Welcome to the HomeComing Scot* praised the airplane as 'truly a modern "magic carpet" of travel' (1938: 22). For some, the advent of air travel promised even new possibilities of linking up Scottish locations, particularly the western isles that were hard to get to by road or rail, with the rest of Europe, suggesting a new modern geography that, at the same time, recalled the lost sea routes of the past and created the archipelagic Scotland of Hugh MacDiarmid's fantasy.

The airplane is thus an apt image for the 1938 Empire Exhibition itself. It is an image of modernity circling and looking over an exhibition that at times seemed marked by nostalgia and regret, anachronistic even in its very form as an empire exhibition held in the last gasp of empire. Air travel simultaneously suggests invasion and attack, and connection and accessibility. It speaks also to a kind of mapping that literally transcends the borders of nation-states, and thus draws attention to the promises and pitfalls of global connection. The airplane offers a view on Bellahouston that is complex and shifting – a view that changes depending upon the motives for and goals of the flight. Likewise, when taken together the various facets of the 1938 British Empire exhibition at Bellahouston present a complex and contradictory view of a changing modern world. Modern Britain has inherited many of the doubts and ambiguities which were evident in 1938, and these have only been exacerbated by

almost another century of increasingly fraught globalisation. If the planned Festival of Britain happens (which at the time of writing seems uncertain for various reasons) it will occur in a similar spirit as Bellahouston, and it will certainly be fascinating to see how it negotiates such complex and competing narratives of national and international identities. To cast our eyes back to the 1938 Empire Exhibition at this particular historical moment, then, enables a richer understanding of a knotty inheritance of conflicting national identities and international affiliations that has never quite been resolved.

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All reasonable attempts have been made to trace the copyright owners of the image by C. L. Davidson (**Figure 2**).

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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