

## **THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SCOTLAND: A SYMBOL FOR A NEW SCOTLAND?**

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Interviewer: Why did you decide to visit the Museum of Scotland?

'English' visitor: Well, the new Scotland – this is the symbol of that. It seems really to be about what makes Scotland, its identity for itself.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The National Museum of Scotland (forthwith 'Museum') opened to critical acclaim on St Andrew's Day 1998 (see McKean 2000). The timing of the opening was culturally and politically symbolic, taking place on the patron saint of Scotland's day, whilst falling between the devolution referendum for, and the opening of, the reinstated Scottish Parliament. The museum offers a representation of Scotland, one which is negotiated by its creators and visitors alike. Given that national identity is a slippery concept subject to fluidity and change (Hall 1992), the image of stability and authority of a museum, which has been compared to the reification of a church (Horne 1984), offers us an interesting site for developing our understanding of how national identity is constructed.

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As Anderson (1983) has argued, it is the task of museums to recover and recharge the 'past', becoming a space in which the nation could present itself as an 'imagined community'. From this perspective, it is argued that 'the national museum assumes a quite particular symbolism and meaning for the nation and the national state' (Prossler 1996, p. 35). In Scotland, national identity has become a contemporary preoccupation, a consistent feature for debate amongst academics, journalists, commentators and authors (Bond 2000). Certainly, the media hailed the opening of the Museum as a symbol of this preoccupation, a marking of the cultural alongside the political developments in the country. However, although some empirical work has been undertaken to assess the complexities of Scottish national identity in the political sphere (see for example, McCrone 1992, Bond 2000), much of the discussion in the cultural sphere has been theoretical (with the exception of McCrone et al in 1995). This, despite the importance placed on the cultural in the development of nationalism. For example, Kellas cites Scotland as an example of this cultural deprivation, and argues that 'any nation whose identity is based on language, religion, education or the Arts, and which is faced with threats to its culture, is likely to react with nationalism' (1998, p. 87).

This article is derived from a wider body of research which has investigated the construction of national identity at the Museum of Scotland.<sup>1</sup> The premise for this paper is based on Hall's assertion that national identity is not innate, but that it is 'formed and transformed within and in relation to representation ... a nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meanings – a system of cultural representation' (1992, p. 292). In the context of this article, the systems of cultural representation are played out in the Museum of Scotland. Our intention is to contribute both to the particular discussions of Scottish national identity and to the wider debates on the negotiation of national identity. Drawing on qualitative research which was undertaken during 1997 and 1999, both before and after the Museum's opening, this paper presents our findings relevant to the research question: to what extent does the Museum of Scotland act as a symbol of Scotland?

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<sup>1</sup> *In addition to visitor interviews, a number of methodologies were used. These included: analysis of the museum displays, archival research on the history of the Museum, interviews with staff at the museum, and analysis of media coverage of the museum, both pre- and post-opening.*

## **NATIONAL IDENTITY AND SCOTLAND**

Our point of departure is the seminal work of Anderson who wrote of the nation as an 'imagined community' (1983). Since it would be impossible to know all those who shared our national identity we can only imagine what makes a national community. Smith (1991) suggests that the modern nation has been made through what he calls 'ethnie', that is the set of myths, symbols and cultural practices, where the nation is shaped by a common myth, a sharing of a common history and way of life. Nations are also 'interpretive communities' that not only have to be imagined but also have to create their own histories or interpretations of themselves (Said 1993). It follows then that 'national histories are continually being re-written, and the re-writing reflects current balances of hegemony' (Billig 1995, p. 71). A national museum, which interprets the histories of the communities that it represents, will itself reflect the hegemonies of its period of creation and subsequent reinterpretations. The myths of Scotland will be represented in the Museum through the interpretative lens of the late 20th century.

Since the 1707 Treaty of Union which joined the Parliaments of England and Scotland, England has dominated politically, not least because of its greater population. Culturally, Scotland has suffered from what has been termed the 'cultural cringe', an 'inferiority complex' which it is claimed is the consequence of its cultural subordination to England (Beveridge and Turnbull 1989, p.12). However, it can be argued that the imbalance of power in the England-Scotland dualism is more complex, with Scottish participation in Imperial expansion (Colley 1992) and differing levels of autonomy in matters of religion, law and education (Paterson 1994). The historical readings suggest an intricate weaving of identities, where specific moments within Scottish history have been privileged to construct a particular Scottish identity.

Equally, Scottish Home Rule remained on the political agenda throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, although the strength of these political movements waxed and waned as 'Scottishness' was privileged to a greater or lesser degree. The end of the 20th century marked a shift which could be attributed to a nationalism upsurge on the global scene. This political assertiveness in Scotland, culminating in the reconvening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, has been paralleled by a cultural renaissance where national identity is produced and consumed through different cultural spheres. The resurgence of Scottish literature, typified by writers such as Alasdair Gray, James Kelman,

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and A. L. Kennedy and traditional Scottish music and dance, often in modern forms, has been paralleled by demands for a Scottish national theatre company and a Gallery of Scottish Art. Despite this, the symbols and myths of Scotland that have international resonance and have been adopted by the Scottish Tourist Board to attract visitors to Scotland belong to a Highland Scotland which was appropriated in the 18th century as evidence of a distinctive culture. This iconography consists typically of tartan, whisky, castles, Bonnie Prince Charlie and Culloden, Highland mountain scenery, and the Braveheart factor of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce. This cultural distinction rested on a Celtic or Gaelic definition in contradistinction to Anglo-Saxon England (Chapman 1992), an invention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) to perpetuate the sentimental appeal of Scotland. Such images of Scotland retain their Highland resonance at the expense of other markers within Scottish society, particularly more contemporary readings offered by the new Scottish literary tradition. The identity of Scotland is portrayed as static, unchanging, its origins buried deep in the mists of time (Gold and Gold 1995).

### **MUSEUMS, NATIONAL MUSEUMS AND THE MUSEUM OF SCOTLAND**

In museums the systems of representation referred to by Hall (1992) produce meanings through objects and their display. Although the definitions of a museum are contested (see McLean 1997) many revolve around the collection, interpretation and display of material culture. For example, a museum is defined by the UK Museums Association as an institution that:

enable[s] people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They ... collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.  
(Museums Association 1998)

The telling and retelling of history in museums is therefore dependent on material evidence. By implication, museums can only tell partial histories. As Jenni Calder, the scriptwriter who oversaw the production of the texts and labels in the Museum, admitted, '[w]e were not telling Scotland's story. ... Our aim was to present the stories objects could tell' (2000, p. 46). Although the object gives the museum an immediacy to history, that history is being narrated by the various curators who both collected and selected, displayed and interpreted the objects. Museums, then, offer a partial narrative of a

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nation's history, the selective readings of the curators. However, technology has opened up routes to alternative interpretations where the visitor can read and hear other 'voices'. Ultimately, though, the visitors bring their own interpretative lens to the museum displays and take their own readings. The visitor is constantly constructing meanings either actively or passively (Fyfe and Ross 1996; Kavanagh 2000).

Despite this, museums are imbued with institutional power, the authorial voice of the museum also being an authoritative voice, or, as Lidchi has argued, the museum has become 'an arbiter of meaning since its institutional position allows it to articulate and reinforce the scientific credibility of frameworks of knowledge ... through its methods of display' (Lidchi 1997, p.198). The museum's authority also extends to the political, whether the political overtones are explicit or implicit. Thus it is claimed that the creation of national museums tends to coincide with surges of nationalism (Kaplan 1994). For example, in the nineteenth century museums such as the Victoria and Albert Museum were created, formed from the Great Exhibition of 1851 which paraded the wares of the British Empire. In the late-twentieth century a new wave of museum creation has resulted in the National Museums of Australia, New Zealand and of Scotland. The creation of some museums, such as the national museums in Estonia in the 19th century, have explicit nationalistic appeals, in this case to re-create a nation which was not considered to be a nation at that time (Gellner 1996). Whilst the linkage between the Museum of Scotland and Scottish national identity is apparent – the very fact that a Museum of Scotland exists reifies the idea of a nation – the creators of the Museum of Scotland were keen to be non-prescriptive in their narrative of Scotland. Thus, according to David Clarke, Head of Exhibitions for the new Museum of Scotland,

I have no doubt that, in the new museum displays, our attempts to explain the complexity of the issues will not dissuade those who are determined to find endorsement of their own sense of national identity, but I hope these displays will give pause to those visitors whose attitudes are more open to self-examination.

(Clarke 1996, p. 75)

Museums, though, are not neutral. The very acts of collecting, selecting, displaying and interpreting objects are political. There is little understanding of the potency of this political context, in particular in national museums which contain the icons of a nation's past. Both the founding of national

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museums and their subsequent development are political acts and their histories need to be located in their political and cultural contexts.

Although the history of the creation of the Museum of Scotland has a long pedigree, stretching back to the beginning of the 20th century, the impetus to build it gained momentum after the Second World War. The decision to build was made in 1992, a time when the Conservative government in power in the UK was at an all-time low in popularity in Scotland. The opening of the Museum coincided with the political symbolism of the re-creation of the Scottish Parliament, and was seen by many as 'a focus for the kind of energy which has given Scotland back its Parliament' (MacMillan 1999, p.112). The logo for the new Museum of Scotland states its purpose, to 'Present Scotland to the World'. That is, the museum is a discursive site where the narratives of Scotland can be told, a place to communicate the 'story of a whole nation'.<sup>2</sup> However, a tension therefore exists between the desire to tell the story of a nation and leaving room for alternative narratives.

The Museum represents Scotland both chronologically and thematically. Ascending through the Museum the visitor passes through different time periods, from the 'Early People' archaeological displays and the geological gallery, through key periods of Scottish history, to the 20th century gallery at the top of the Museum. Contained within this broad chronology are specific themes, such as religion, which run throughout the Museum. The majority of the collections are housed in traditional glass cases, although a number of the larger exhibits, such as the Dupplin Cross and the Ellesmere Steam locomotive, are free standing. The collections are presented in a building which was designed by the architects Benson and Forsyth, the winners of an international competition. The intention of the architects is to create a building which reflects the vernacular of Scotland and is historically located in its environs (Benson and Forsyth 1999).<sup>3</sup>

## **THE RESEARCH**

The findings reported here form part of a wider research project which is investigating the construction of national identity in the Museum of Scotland. The method used to answer the research question addressed in this paper

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Jones, former Director of the Museum of Scotland, in *McKean (2000: xii)*

<sup>3</sup> For a 'virtual tour' of the Museum visit <http://www.nms.ac.uk/mos/index.htm>

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involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with museum consumers. The interviews were conducted on two separate occasions to allow for a time-sequential analysis. The first set of interviews were undertaken in summer 1997 before the opening of the Museum of Scotland with its projected target audience, that is: Scots; visitors from the rest of the UK; and foreign tourists, including the Scottish diaspora. This research was conducted in the Royal Museum of Scotland which is adjacent to the new Museum building.<sup>4</sup> The second set of interviews took place with Museum of Scotland visitors in the Museum itself after it had opened, in spring 1999, with a similar profile of audience.

Of the questions asked, a number related to the research questions of relevance to this paper. A total of 80 Scots, 52 English and 40 overseas visitors were interviewed. The nationality of the respondents was determined by using a question at the beginning of the interview which asked, 'What nationality are you?' With regard to the Scottish/English division, the respondents referenced themselves as English/Scottish rather than British. The interviews were semi-structured, lasting 10-30 minutes each, were tape recorded, transcribed and subsequently analysed using the techniques of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Thus we initially tagged extracts and then linked these extracts where they related to a specific theme. At each stage of the analysis, as a research team we collectively reviewed the output from these procedures. This was to ensure that we agreed on the interpretation of the data.

One of the key aims of the research was to consider the symbolism and resonance of the Museum in Scotland. The literature would suggest that museums can in fact act as potent symbols, particularly in newly emerging nations or old nations which are re-asserting their identity (Kaplan 1996; Boswell and Evans 1999). In the case of Scotland, the contemporary context

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<sup>4</sup> *The Royal Scottish Museum was founded in 1854 as the Industrial Museum of Scotland. In addition to geology and natural history collections, it houses the international material culture held by the National Museum of Scotland (NMS). The NMS was created in 1985 as the organisational umbrella of national museums in Scotland, with the amalgamation of the Royal Scottish Museum and the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (the forerunner of the Museum of Scotland). Along with a number of other 'nationals', such as the Museum of Flight and the Museum of Scottish Country life, the two principal museums of the NMS fulfil its remit of showing 'Scotland to the world and the world to Scotland'.*

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of political devolution and cultural self-confidence suggest a re-assertion of identity. Is this in fact played out in the Museum? The creators of the museum were conscious of the political context in which the Museum was opened and were keen to distance themselves from accusations that the Museum could be seen as an assertion of Scottish political independence. Did the Museum, then, succeed in divorcing itself from the political realities of contemporary Scotland?

In order to address the symbolism of the museum, a number of questions were asked of the visitors which were intended to answer the research question: in what ways does the Museum act as a symbol of Scotland? The time trajectory enabled an assessment of differences in findings from pre- to post-opening, while the comparison of the different target groups allowed for insights in to how Scots and non-Scots, particularly the English, compared.

The nature of the research has limitations, notwithstanding the particular methodological limitations of in-depth interviews. The fundamental problem is in the nature of identities, which are multiple and fluid, so it could be argued that it is not possible to symbolise national identity. Equally, the motives of the visitors in visiting the museum were varied and may not have included any national agenda. Consequently the visitors may not actually have addressed the questions we asked them whilst visiting the Museum. They are however linked by the fact that they visited the Museum. We may also have subscribed to the visitors a more active role in the consumption process than actually took place. Finally, we also recognise that by focusing solely on national identities we have omitted alternative identities. Despite these reservations and caveats, the findings of the research offer some illuminating insights in to the construction of national identities.

### **NATIONAL MUSEUMS AS SYMBOLS**

Before the opening of the Museum target visitors were asked, 'Do you think that Scotland needs a national museum?' The response was overwhelmingly in favour from Scots and non-Scots alike, with responses such as,

Every country needs a national museum.

I think it is a focus of interest in the country and particularly at the present time when we are feeling a bit conscious of our identity.

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This strong sense of agreement that every country should have a national museum is in line with our expectations given the potency of national museums. The Museum of Scotland was seen as a symbol of Scotland. It has both cultural and political resonance, its national symbolism operating beyond the context of the Museum itself. This is more than just the 'politics' or institutional power of the museum, but is the power of the institution within politics. It is also interesting to note that since the opening of the Museum it has been used on a number of occasions by the Executive of the Scottish Parliament, not least in the symbolic partnership pact between the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats on 14 May 1999. This relationship has not been adequately addressed in historical discourses and yet could shed significant light on the cultural processes of a nation.

If the Museum of Scotland can act as a symbol then what is it saying about Scottish identity? As already suggested, the intention of the 'producers' was to be non-prescriptive, to allow the visitors to take away their own readings. The focus was on the objects rather than the story of the history of Scotland even if this meant that, for example, William Wallace was omitted due to a lack of material evidence associated with the 'Braveheart' hero.<sup>5</sup> A decision was also made to directly confront the popular iconography of Scotland. The curators made an early decision to attempt to debunk the Highlandism myth. One glass case, 'Images and Realities', confronts these icons, almost poking fun at them, the rest of the Museum having been designed to explore the 'real' history of the Scottish people. With a backdrop of tartan, gingham, sporrans and amusing figurines, 'Images and Realities' problematises Highlandism. This then begs the question, in what ways is Scotland symbolised if we peel away the myths? The museum consumers were asked a number of questions in order to try and tease out a possible answer. In the pre-opening interviews, the respondents were asked, 'What would you personally like to see in a Museum of Scotland?'. A typical answer was as follows,

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

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<sup>5</sup> *The Museum's staff were forced to respond when a campaign led by the newspaper **Scotland on Sunday** insisted on Wallace's place in the Museum. The omission has now been rectified.*

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In similar vein, when asked, 'What do you think that the Museum of Scotland should be saying about Scotland?' the responses often focused on the iconography of Scotland.

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

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

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

Interestingly, when asked at the end of the interview, 'Is there anything else you would like to add?', one respondent addressed the iconography dilemma,

I am not quite sure how you would portray this Scottish identity you know. I wouldn't like it to be all tartan and what not, but tartan is part of Scotland and I don't see why we shouldn't use it.

After the Museum opened a number of questions were asked which attempted to elicit some feel for the visitors' readings of Scotland in the Museum. Thus, in response to the question, 'What do you think that the Museum of Scotland is saying about Scotland?', one respondent voiced the views of a number of visitors,

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

Equally, when asked, 'Do you think that the Museum is trying to present any particular image of Scotland?', a number of responses alluded to Scottish iconography, for example,

more forward-looking rather than tartan and haggis.

Clearly, then, the Highlandism iconography is regarded as a problem by a number of visitors, although in tourist terms it would be regarded as a strength (Griggs 2000). There is recognition that the Museum is portraying a Scotland which goes beyond the myth-making, that it offers an alternative symbol of Scotland. Or maybe it just offers another myth?

## **SYMBOLS AND THE 'OTHER'**

Here we are trying to elicit any significant difference between the readings of the Museum by those defining themselves as Scottish and those defining themselves as English. Post-opening, there was a marked difference in a number of responses to the questions, 'What do you think the Museum is saying about Scotland?' and 'Do you think that the Museum is trying to present any particular image of Scotland?'

Apart from the idea that the Museum of Scotland could be seen as an 'ambassador' for Scotland, presenting a positive image of Scotland to the rest of the world, the Scottish visitors seemed to have little sense that the Museum had a definitional role.

It seems to be trying to promote a kind of pride or confidence in identity. I don't, I don't – it's not particularly nationalistic I don't think. I wouldn't know if some people would think that.

Basically I think it's just showing Scotland at its best you know. Not a particular image as such, just showing Scotland in general.

However, the main differences between the visitors who identified themselves as Scottish and those who identified themselves as English was the way in which the English saw the Museum as in some way defining Scotland. For example:

Very much of an individual nation.

They are making Scotland's identity very clear, um, pieces of historical facts and ... most objects of Scotland, yeah.

It's saying about Scotland that it's got a long history. I formed the impression in the early part of the museum of a very war-like history.

[It's about] the English, battling against the English over the borders.

Billig (1995) has argued that one of the ways in which the nation is constructed is through its continual referencing, often unnoticed, in everyday life. The existence of the Museum itself is part of this flagging through the understanding that there is this thing called 'Scotland' and that Scottish material culture is a relevant category for collection interpretation and display. In our interviews, the English seemed to recognise a more conspicuous flagging of the nation within the exhibitions than the Scots. Few referenced individual exhibits, but those who did noted the Declaration of

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Arbroath which is situated in the 'Scotland Defined' gallery, and is one of the first historical exhibition spaces that the visitor enters.<sup>6</sup> That the Declaration could influence visitors' readings of the Museum can be seen in the following exchange between two English visitors during their interview.

[1] Oh it's quite dangerous really [laughs]. There is, that was the impression that I got, which is OK by me.

[2] No it's much more subtle.

[1] It wasn't when you came in the front door...

[Interviewer] What was it about the door?

[1] Well the thing, there's an inscription on the wall saying you know, 'we'll never lose our freedom'. No it's not the, it's just before that. There are two bits of handwriting ... you know, kind of 'freedom' and 'we don't want to be subjugated by anyone' and you expect that, it's the nearest you can, it's the nearest to a 'V' sign on the building.

Another English visitor commented:

Well, I think it's obviously trying to, um, give a very broad feel of the history of Scotland right from the sort of the word go, um, perhaps one or two of the introductory displays or presentations are a little bit, eh, nationalist in their flavour, some dangerous perhaps [laughs].

One explanation why the nationalist narrative of the Museum was more prominent for the English was because their understandings of English 'national identity' were problematised. Said (1978) argues that the representation of the 'other' is also part of the construction of the 'self'. National identity is marked through difference, different national identities being imagined in different ways. Difference is often expressed in terms of a dualism, through the 'other', where certain groups of people will be included and excluded (Saussure1960). Thus identity is relational, difference being symbolically marked in relation to others – for example, male-female, English-Scottish, black-white. The dualism in identity formation involves an

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<sup>6</sup> *The Declaration of Arbroath was a letter to Pope John XXII in 1320 in response to an English attempt to have Robert the Bruce excommunicated. The section of the Declaration quoted within the Museum of Scotland reads: 'for, so long as but a hundred remain alive, never will we on any conditions be brought under English rule. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom – for that alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself'.*

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unequal opposition, where, according to Derrida (1976), there is an imbalance of power between the two terms. As part of this process of distinction, English visitors to the museum, as well as learning who 'the Scots' are, learn they are not 'Scottish'.

The English visitors articulated a reading of 'Scotland' in the Museum as a separate nation. The referencing of the perceived distinctiveness of Scotland made material through the narratives of the exhibition displays perhaps disrupted the idea of an unproblematic conflation of British-English identity (McCrone 1992). For the English, then, the Museum was acting as a potent symbol of Scotland's self-determination in the contemporary political climate.

### **A SYMBOL OF THE FUTURE**

The other clearly defined response to our questions regarding the presentation and image of Scotland in the Museum was voiced by both Scots and the English alike. Pre-opening we had asked the visitors, 'What do you think that the Museum of Scotland should be saying about Scotland?' A number of respondents suggested that the Museum should be forward looking.

Scotland's past, present, and also its future.

I just think it will be a museum that will be right up to date or it should be a museum that represents not only the past but the future and the ongoing process. Make it up-to-date and not just historical.

Post-opening, this view was voiced more strongly. For example,

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

A developing pioneering image.

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

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

The Museum then, for these visitors, symbolised the future of Scotland. This clearly needs to be set in the changing political and cultural context. As with other findings from this research which also suggested more positive

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connotations of Scottish identity (Cooke and McLean 2001), the Museum was considered to be reflecting the history of Scotland but in a way which suggested its pride and confidence in a new political era.

The architecture of the building made a significant contribution to this sense of the future, of a 'new' Scotland. For some visitors the objects were of secondary importance compared to the building. In response to the post-opening question 'Were there any displays or objects that particularly attracted you or interested you?', the answer often referred to the architecture, for example:

Yes, the building. Benson and Forsyth are just a knockout. It's a statement that how it came when we're getting independence kind of thing, at this time. It is, it must have been God who done this. It's a statement.

Equally, when asked 'Is there anything else you want to say?', a number of respondents referred to the building:

It's a statement. Edinburgh is a lovely town, it's got beautiful buildings, but they're all in the past. This is in the future and it's a pointer, it's a marker, it's a, they've made a mark here, and I think it's absolutely wonderful, absolutely wonderful. It's really great for Scotland to have some forward looking architecture that is an art form and not just commercial development.

I think in some ways the building actually overwhelms the exhibits.

Designed by the architects as 'rigorously contextual' (Benson 2000, p 19) the museum was conceived of as creating axes through the city, linking with the surrounding landscape and drawing on Scottish architectural traditions. From these responses, it would seem that the building acts as a symbolic marker for Scotland for the visitors, creating links between the objects within and the Scotland without.

The respondents were also asked to comment on the relationship between the cultural and the political, and the impact the Museum might have on Scottish identity. The responses differed pre- and post-opening. For example, when we asked potential visitors, 'Do you think that a Museum of Scotland could change what it means to be Scottish?' the response was mainly sceptical,

I don't think it could change. I think it will help to define it.

Well, not single handedly obviously. But I mean, going back to the answer of what the museum should do, I guess you can help in

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communicating a sense of belonging and self worth, and contribute to a change of general feeling of what it means to be Scottish or whatever. But it won't do that on its own, but particularly with the link up to devolution I guess it might play a role.

However, post-opening, there were some visitors who did suggest the potential of the Museum to construct a Scottish identity.

It can change people's own impressions of their own history, give them a real sense of history and a society to which they belong...

I think it will give people the chance to be more aware of what is happening.

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

I think it can focus what it means to be Scottish, it can focus on the people.

Again, these responses have a particular context, and echo the political discourse of the opening of the Museum. For example, Scotland's first First Minister, the late Donald Dewar, referred to the relationship between the political and the cultural when he considered,

two momentous happenings. One was the opening of the Museum of Scotland, and the other was the reinstatement of the Scottish Parliament. The future interplay between these two key institutions will help to shape both our cultural identity and our constitutional destiny in the next millennium.

(2000: ix)

## **CONCLUSION**

The Museum of Scotland acts as a symbol which is both cultural and political, the relationship between the two weaving their way through the historical paths of Scotland and of the creation of the Museum. The readings of the Museum evident from the research suggest that the Museum, although potentially a focus of pride, allows multiple understandings, both national and non-national. Rather than being seen as a place through which Scottish national identity is defined, the Museum should be seen as a cultural and political terrain over which visions of Scottish national identity are played out by both the producers and consumers. Evidence presented in this article suggests that the contemporary political context has a crucial impact upon the

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understandings of the museum, despite Museum staff distancing the Museum from nationalist readings. The Museum can be seen as a symbol of a 'new' Scotland, in terms of focusing or enhancing either what it means to be Scottish on the part of Scottish visitors or the responses of English visitors who recorded a sense of their own 'otherness' within the museum.

Although the dominant reading of the Museum is that it has a proactive role in national identity formation, other visitors suggested alternative, often ambivalent understandings. Museums offer spaces for alternative readings and the creation of alternative understandings of identity in the relationship between the displays and the understandings that visitors bring with their visit. This would suggest that, as understandings of Scottish identity change, so will understandings of the Museum.

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