

Celebrating Scottish Heroes

by Clarisse Godard Desmarest

The 19th century in Scotland saw the emergence of an architectural trend of building monuments dedicated to the celebration of cultural heroes. In his latest book, Johnny Rodger examines the political significance of the hero building in the relationships between the people, the nation and the state.

Reviewed: Johnny Rodger, *The Hero Building: An Architecture of Scottish National Identity*, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015.

A book on the nineteenth-century Scottish monumental tradition is timely given the current political situation and public debate on the place of Scotland within the UK after Brexit. In the concluding paragraph to his book *The Hero Building: An Architecture of Scottish National Identity*, Johnny Rodger asks whether lessons may be learnt from the 19th-century monuments built to heroes and whether they would convincingly apply to present-day Scotland. He answers that the range of political and civil discussions proper to a 19th century-context bear little comparison with contemporary events and cannot help anticipate the future. Rodger argues that “the study of this history can, however, help prevent our being confined to our own particular intellectual province of time, and open up a wider panorama of the infinite possibilities in the historical relations between the nation, the state, the land, identity, and literary and material culture” (p. 215). Although this is an architectural history book, the monuments are analysed in relation to issues of national identity, which means that the discussion crosses over into other disciplines including political history.

The “hero building”: promoting the Scottish national identity

The author sets out to define and study the phenomenon of the “hero building” as an architecture of Scottish national identity. Rodger recalls that in many parts of Europe, as nationalism grew in the 19th century, it became increasingly common to devote a cult to heroes through commemorative events, monument buildings and statues. At a time of deep social and economic transformations caused by the industrial revolution, the hero offered a rallying point for all classes of the nation. Such a tradition of monumental buildings expressing national and civic pride stretches back several centuries, and Rodger cites the first monument to be inaugurated to great men of the nation: the Pantheon in Paris in 1791.

Like Christopher Whatley, who has examined the memorialising of Robert Burns (1759-96), Scotland’s “national bard”, Rodger argues that the celebration of cultural heroes helped to construct and reinforce collective identities in Scotland (Whatley, “Robert Burns, Memorialization, and the ‘Heart-beatings’ of Victorian Scotland,” in Murray Pittock, ed., *Robert Burns in Global Culture*, 2011). Cultural icons, largely writers and literary figures, rather than political leaders were mostly chosen as heroes. Many of the buildings erected across Scotland in the 19th century were indeed dedicated to David Hume (1711-76), Walter Scott (1771-1832) and Dugald Stewart (1753-1828), and several hero buildings drew heavily on literary tradition including the National Wallace Monument in Stirling (chapter 6). Rodger explains that unlike other European nationalisms Scottish nationalism was directed not at independence from the Union and empire, in which Scotland was occupying an ever-increasing place, but rather at the acknowledgement of a cultural specificity. Scotland was distinctive in that it had been a nation with no state since the political union of 1707. According to Rodger the nationalism invoked in the raising of these heroic architectural monuments appears to be an antiquarian nationalism and not a liberational nationalism (p. 18).

The celebration of “unionist nationalism”

In *Unionist Nationalism: Governing Urban Scotland 1830-1860* (1999), Graeme Morton sees no contradiction between the assertion of Scotland’s difference, the demand for national recognition and the support for the UK and empire. As Graeme Morton has shown for the period under study, the urban bourgeoisie of Scotland increased its control over local power and was largely free to organize civil society without interference from the centralised government power in London. It was therefore eager to celebrate its participation in the heroic through

architectural monumentalism. Morton terms this positive assertion of Scottish nationalism within the union by elites as “unionist nationalism”. The old aristocracy and the Church no longer exclusively controlled commissions for public monuments. Rodger shares Morton’s reading of architectural monuments built in the second half of the 19th century as representative of a modern, more democratically-controlled society distanced from its feudal origins. Both he and Morton opt for a positive interpretation of the paradox between an extremely dynamic monumental building in the 19th century and a parallel decline in political consciousness. Marinell Ash, by contrast, describes a “vain type of antiquarian Nationalism” in *The Strange Death of Scottish History*.

In his analysis, Rodger distinguishes hero buildings from memorial statuary and numbers twenty important completed such buildings across the country, both urban and rural. Going beyond the definition of monumentalism provided by M. Glendinning, R. MacInnes and A. MacKechnie in their seminal publication *A History of Scottish Architecture from the Renaissance to the Present Day* (1996), Rodger describes hero buildings as having no particular function other than that of public or civic commemoration. Buildings of this tradition which preceded the boom in raising statues in Britain in the second half of the 19th century include Thomas Hamilton’s monuments to Burns in Alloway (1820) and Edinburgh (1831), the Scott Monument in Edinburgh by George Meikle Kemp (1846) and the Wallace Monument in Stirling by John T. Rochhead (1869).

A stylistic and political value

Rodger engages in a discussion about the styles used for these buildings and the political ideologies associated to them. This tradition ranges from Robert Adam’s classical Hume Monument (1777) to Robert Lorimer’s eclectic gothic War Memorial (1927), both in Edinburgh. For Rodger, the neoclassical or Greek Revival (Burns Monument in Edinburgh or the National Monument on Calton Hill) may be opposed to the neomedieval or neobaronial (Abbotsford or Inveraray). Although values are associated to each style and mostly correspond to the symbolic dichotomy between the restraint of Enlightenment classicism and the Romantic evocation of the native, Rodger explains that such important figures like Sir Walter Scott, a Tory but educated in the Whig ideology of the Enlightenment, participated in the construction of the National Monument in Edinburgh, a building in the Greek Revival (chapter 4). Far from arguing that one style opposed or gave way to another in the Victorian period, Rodger shows that in Edinburgh a fusion of the styles operated in a similar commitment to enhance the picturesque qualities of the city. Such an approach is shared by John Lowrey (“From Caesaria to Athens: Greek Revival in Edinburgh”, *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 2001).

Rodger also interprets the meaning of monuments belonging to the Roman neoclassical style (chapter 2) like Robert Adam's Hume Monument in the Old Calton Cemetery (1777) or James Gillespie Graham's Glenfinnan Monument (completed in 1815). Set against a spectacular urban or natural backdrop, both these monuments have an emotional or Romantic streak.

In his analysis of buildings to Robert Burns, Rodger alludes to the shifting interpretation of the poet's works and differentiates later monuments in the neobaronial style at Kilmarnock (1877) and Mauchline (1898) (chapter 7) from earlier monuments like the Dumfries Mausoleum (1818), the Alloway monument (1820) and the Edinburgh monument (1830) (Chapter 3). Whilst in the earlier monuments Burns was celebrated as an Enlightenment poet, the generous and humane qualities of the poet were more clearly emphasised in the second half of the 19th century with the rise of civic Scotland, and indeed of the welfare state in the 20th century.

Rodger's book is composed of a total of eleven chapters with nine chapters devoted to case studies. Although the architectural "tradition" of hero building is exclusively nineteenth-century, which justifies the time frame of the book, Rodger does not fail to broaden the scope of his analysis by alluding to several more recently built monuments like Douglas Gordon's "Proof", made in 1990 on Glasgow Green but lost in 2012. Rodger also refers to aberrations or failed monuments, like the Hamilton Mausoleum at Hamilton and the McCaig Tower in Oban (chapter 8). The definition of monument buildings given at an earlier stage in the book allows the author to conclude that the tower fails to display an element of enduring public or civic commemoration.

The last and concluding chapter dwells upon the afterlife and future of the monuments. Rodger explains that some have suffered damage or lie empty and others have become popular tourist attractions. Visitors centres like the National Wallace Monument, near Stirling, capture the interest of tourists from Scotland and abroad including from America. Rodger explains that this attraction has been revived and nourished by Hollywood blockbuster *Braveheart* (1995), a film directed by and starring Mel Gibson which offers a loose account of the 13th century story of Scottish national hero William Wallace.

By focusing on a wide range of monuments built to heroes, Rodger offers a very interesting insight into the roles played by such buildings in negotiating the relationships between the nation, the state, the people and their history and culture. In a civil society affected by industrialisation and rapid urbanisation, the monuments to cultural figures offered coherence and stability and provided a necessary mediation between the classes.