

## RA Conference 2018—Romantic Empires; Romantic Identities

Aviemore, the Scottish Highlands, 26-28 July 2018

### Keynote speakers:

Murdo Macdonald (University of Dundee)

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The Romantic era was an age of troubled identities and warring empires, and the two issues were inherently linked. It saw the rise of the British and French Empires, and their clash with each other along with the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. It saw the ongoing exploration, contemplation, and sometimes colonial subjection of distant empires, such as the Mughal, Persian and Chinese Empires. It saw a renewed interest in the classical democracy, and its fate in the Athenian Republic and the Roman Empire. Rousseau's concept of a social contract led to new concepts of citizenship and national identity, that played out in French and American republican constitutionalism.

Nor did philosophy or theology lag behind in the questions of identity during the Romantic era. European thinkers such as Schleiermacher were forced to contemplate what should even count as a religion, when confronted with reports of the very alien-seeming religious traditions such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, or the religious practices of the Americas and the Pacific. Post-Kantian thinkers such as Fichte and Schelling resorted to mystically inflected cosmological narratives that depict a cosmic self, developing itself out of nothingness or the absolute. Shelley and Byron turned to Neoplatonism which seemed to offer an alternative to modern scepticism (and which had also underpinned much of medieval mystical tradition). Coleridge lectured on classical Greece and the *Bhagavad Gita* side by side. Keats turned to Greek mythology and mystery to create a poetic vision of the "vale of soul-making", and Shelley even declared that "we are all Greeks". Two of Blake's first works declared that "ALL RELIGIONS are ONE", and that "THERE is NO NATURAL RELIGION". The challenge that the Romantics felt to identity, and to what identity could even amount to philosophically, is plain.

All of these empires were built on the more or less successful creation of identities out of disparate multi-ethnic groupings, as Benedict Anderson famously argued in *Imagined Communities*. Even the English and French languages are based on the suppression of regional dialects, not to mention minority languages such as Gaelic, Cymraeg, Cornish, and Elsässerdtitsch. Various religious loyalties formed a similar kaleidoscope of identities that each imperial power was forced to either suppress or accommodate. But despite Fukuyama's sanguine expectations that all of these identities and their ideological scaffolding would be washed away by modernity (*The End of History*), and despite Huntington's (now chilling) counterargument that cultural and religious identity would replace ideology as the source of future conflict (*The Clash of Civilizations*)—despite all these theories we find ourselves confronted by what are quintessentially the same questions that confronted the Romantics: questions of unity and succession in the European Union; identity and independence; mass migration; narrative and historical authenticity; and overwhelming new forms of religious conflict.

Subsequent French attempts to theorise national identity in response to the supposed naïveté of Anderson, Fukuyama and Huntington, have themselves dated badly given now-ubiquitous terrorism. Are we aided much by being told by Alfred Grosser (*Les identités difficiles*) that identity consists of "appartenances" ("belonging [to groups]"), and that political actors are always looking to maximize their "representativity", which can lead to the creation of new groups, some of which are artificial? Are we even supposed to be surprised to be told by Amin Maalouf (*Les identités meurtrières*) that these group memberships change from time and that on top of this we actively change the membership that

we take as being our identity depending on external factors, such as danger, violence or oppression? Would this not seem all too familiar to the Romantics? Would they perhaps think us naïve?

It was inevitable that all of the Romantics (not to mention generations of Romanticism scholars), would take an interest in questions of identity, and particularly of suppressed or accommodated identities. Keats and Coleridge made their walking tours of Scotland, James MacPherson created a literary sensation with his discovery, or invention, of Ossian's *Fingal*, a supposed archaic northern poetic cycle to rival Homer. Sir Walter Scott likewise invented a romanticised Scottish identity that was capable of demanding respect in the modern world. And he even simultaneously revived tartan, rediscovered the lost Scottish crown jewels, and almost absurdly convinced George IV to wear a kilt in 1822.

The Scottish Highlands play a particular role here, and therefore form the perfect backdrop to a conference considering these issues. After the uprising was defeated in 1745 at Culloden, Gaelic language, clan structures, tartan, and even the bagpipes were all suppressed. It was even proposed to rename the Scots "North Britons". Yet by 1815 the Scots Greys were able to charge the French lines at Waterloo, chanting the war cry "Scotland Forever!", and thereby "forever" change the image of Scottish identity within the British world. Yet the loss of Gaelic heritage, and the question-marks over the issue persist, with a closely run referendum on Scottish independence in 2014, and even more recent calls to hold another in light of Brexit.

A conference in the Highlands, just kilometres from Culloden, will allow us to explore the physical backdrops that operated as one of the forges of identity and empire during the Romantic era.

Possible areas of specific focus might include:

- Romantic images of ancient or exotic empires (*Kubla Kahn*, *The Revolt of Islam*, etc)
- Byron and the Greek rebellion against the Ottoman Empire
- James "Ossian" MacPherson, and representations of the ancient north
- Sir Walter Scott, and the Romantic image of Scotland
- Romantic rebels; Romantic rebellions
- Theories of identity (Romantic and modern)
- Romantic concepts of race and the suppression of racial identities
- Romantic images of suppressed or marginalised identities (Celtic, Alsatian, Basque, Colonial)
- Geopolitical theories, and theories of empires
- The role of the Highland clearances in populating the British Empire and / or its armies
- The Celtic revivals (Irish, Scottish, Welsh and others)
- Symbols of identity and their (re)creation (the tartan revival, Marianne, *La Marseillaise*, the Union Jack)
- The creation of modern imperial identities as national identities (French, British, American)
- Competition between Empires to subsume other identities (eg the French and British invasions of Egypt, the competition to decipher the hieroglyphs etc.)
- Changes in legal identity and citizenship flowing from French and American Constitutionalism
- Romantic theories of religiosity, particularly with regard to "exotic" religions
- Cosmic theories of identity, both theological and philosophical

The conference will take place in a gap between several of the other summer conferences, with plenty of time for participants to get to and from other conferences. There will be one or two outings to places of historical interest, details of which are currently being confirmed.

Papers should be 20 minutes. Please email 300-word proposals, and also a brief bio, in word format to Richard Berkeley ([berkeley5000@gmail.com](mailto:berkeley5000@gmail.com)) by 1 April 2018. All information can be found at [www.romanticism55.com](http://www.romanticism55.com)