The North British Society of Halifax, Nova Scotia
And the Social Dominance of Imperial Scottishness

————

Matthew Downey

Over the course of the 19th century, Nova Scotia established a Scottish identity that was unique among the British Empire. Its Scottishness can be traced back to 1621, with the Royal Charter given to Sir William Alexander to establish a Scotch colony there. However, the region did not actually see a significant number of Scottish people until the early 19th century. The North British Society, established in 1768 in Halifax, worked to establish identifiable Scottish links that did not necessarily rely on ethnic connection with Scotland. This paper examines the role of the North British Society in Halifax during the latter half of the 19th century as an agent of imperial consolidation in the province. During the mid-Victorian era, when the percentage of ethnic Scots in Halifax lessened, the North British Society was active to promote the Scottish character of the city in a way that simultaneously reflected imperial loyalty. Thereby, the Society reflected a specific pan-imperial culture rooted in a mythic Scottishness.

Scottish Highlander culture, effectively from the end of the Battle of Culloden in 1746, was throughout the growth of the British Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries not only a distinct feature of Scottish identity. Rather, it was essentially commandeered in order to carry far wider-reaching Imperial implications.[1] As an Empire-wide identity was being forged throughout Britain and her colonies overseas, Scots culture was a useful tool. The North British Society, founded in Halifax, Nova Scotia on 26 March 1768, is among the most successful examples of such endeavours at pursuing coalescent Scottish and Imperial identity in British North America.[2] Founded ten years before the much larger scale Highland Society of London, the North British Society was a pioneering imperialist influence in what would later become the Dominion of Canada.[3] In the Victorian Era, a time when the

British Empire was to reach extraordinary cultural heights, the North British Society of Halifax would play a more relatively locally orientated yet highly influential role in establishing and consolidating a strong Scottish identity in that city which further cemented its Imperial ties. Accordingly, the North British Society fostered one of the greatest examples of cultural consolidation in the entire Empire, as it became an integral part of Halifax's cultural society in general by the late nineteenth century.

Despite the fact that the North British Society can claim to have existed in Halifax since 1768, only nineteen years after the city's founding, it has been pointed out by scholars such as Michael Vance that, "by the end of the eighteenth century, although the name Nova Scotia had been employed for almost two centuries, there was little that one could identify as especially Scottish about the colony."[4] Indeed, though the Scottish nature of Nova Scotia had its roots in a Royal Charter given to the Scot Sir William Alexander in 1621, the province was primarily populated by the indigenous Mi'kmaq, French Acadians, and British soldiers and settlers until the early nineteenth century.[5] From 1815 to 1838 that began to change with a strong growth in Scottish communities in Nova Scotia through steady immigration.[6] However, as for the rest of the nineteenth century, Scottish immigration to the province then fell comparatively below that of non-Scots; it is clear that that time in the early nineteenth century was integral in establishing the dominance of Scottish identity there.[7] This situation created by the contrasting factors of Scottish cultural prominence and the reality of non-Scottish ethnic domination is important to an understanding of the role of that culture in establishing Imperial ties. In Victorian era Nova Scotia, "as Scottishness became more formalised," in Imperial terms, "the original Gaelic culture," representing independent Celtic Scots identity, "began its precipitous decline."[8] The goals of the North British Society coalesced with that reality; it was less a closed ethnic brotherhood than a national society which represented community interests.[9] As such, though the province of Nova Scotia's Scottishness may have been more mythic than truly substantiated at the dawn of the Victorian era, that did not inhibit the North British or other Scottish societies from their aspirations. The mythic Scottishness of the province created an ideal setting for the establishment of a tailored version of Scottish diasporic culture which would engender Imperial ties among the local elite. The very name of the society alludes to a specifically Brit-

---

1 Katie McCullough, "Building the Highland Empire: The Highland Society of London and the Formation of Charitable Networks in Great Britain and Canada, 1779-1857," (Phd diss. University of Guelph, 2014): 51-2.

2 James S. Macdonald, "Annals, North British Society, Halifax, Nova Scotia: with Portraits and Biographical Notes, 1768-1903," *Internet Archives* (1905): 1https://archive.org/details/annalsnorthbriti00nortuoft/page/n13/mode/2up (accessed 4 April 2020).

3 McCullough, "Building the Highland Empire," 1: The society in London having been founded in May 1778.

4 Michael Vance, "Powerful Pathos: The Triumph of Scottishness in Nova Scotia," in *Transatlantic Scots*, ed. Celeste Roy (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005): 157.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 157-9.

7 Ibid., 159.

8 Ibid., 160

9 Andrew Brown, "Discourse Delivered Before the North-British Society : in Halifax, Nova Scotia, at Their Anniversary Meeting on the 30th of November, 1790," *Internet Archive* (1791): 12-13 https://archive.org/details/cihm60175/page/n15/mode/2up (Accessed 4 April 2020).

ish-unionist perspective on Scots culture, a fact which further highlights its intentions.[10] Other contemporary societies did not have such a potentially broad appeal. Groups such as the Halifax Caledonian Club were much more of a closed ethnically oriented group bent on perpetuating Scottishness in a stricter sense.[11] Even the Highland Society of London and its Canadian branch were more overt about "preserving the martial spirit, language, dress, music, and antiquities of the ancient Caledonians" than the North British Society was.[12] This does not mean that those more Gael-centric groups necessarily played a different role than the North British in creating a transatlantic connection. However, the North British Society was much more Imperially minded in its language, with its goals to aid in establishing connections between new emigrants, merchants, and the local "kindred societies".[13] Establishing community connections took precedence over the preservation of distinct Gaelic customs.

From its inception, the North British Society's membership was composed of the "Scottish professional and mercantile elite and, as a group, exerted considerable influence on local and provincial politics."[14] The Society's members over the years included some of the most influential figures in Nova Scotia as well as endorsements from honorary members of like-minded Imperial figures such as Lord Selkirk and Lord Lorne.[15] The status of its membership underpins the essentially paternalistic nature of the North British Society with both its initial mission of settling Highland Scots as well as its cultural role of perpetuating unity through Imperialistic Scottishness.[16] The endorsement

of Lord Selkirk in 1804, though it was more in spirit than in actual involvement, helps one to understand the Society better through their shared values. Selkirk famously made several attempts at settling displaced Highland Scots throughout British North America in distinct new colonies. That endeavour was indeed in line with the charitable spirit of the North British Society.[17] Lord Lorne's endorsement during his tenure as Governor General of Canada in the 1870s as well has some symbolic meaning; for, as the heir to the Campbell clan as well as an Imperial statesman he embodied the sort of cohesion between Scottishness and Empire that the North British Society perpetuated.[18]

In practical terms, the local elite who made up the active membership of the Society worked greatly to wield cultural influence in Nova Scotia. Men of great historical significance such as Alexander Keith and Sir Sandford Fleming graced the Society with their membership.[19] The high society of Halifax often engaged with the North British Society even if they were not Scots themselves; the Lieutenant Governor could be found attending the Society's events and Joseph Howe was also known to be a featured speaker.[20] By becoming the bastion of elite status in Victorian Halifax, the North British Society was able to rise above being simply a cultural organization for helping immigrants having come from the old world in adjusting to the new. Like other Scottish societies, the North British Society indeed existed as a platform from which to create a transatlantic network of shared culture. However, unlike groups such as the Highland Society of London and its affiliates, the North British Society was able to claim, if not a monopoly, an immense amount of influence in the elite class of Halifax. The North British Society had such a wide-ranging appeal that even non-Scots were often affiliated in unofficial terms.[21] Despite being essentially a society for the benefit of Scots, the North British found an appeal that rose above its mission; its active investment in cultural monuments aided them greatly in that appeal.

Celebrations of Scottish culture played a large role in Highland and Scots societies' activities in the Victorian era, and the North British Society was no different.[22] The North British Society was active in working together with other groups to engage the public with Scottish culture. Events such as the centenary Burns' Day celebration

10 Paul Ward, *Britishness Since 1870* (London UK: Routledge, 2004): 149.

11 Halifax Caledonian Club, "Constitution and Rules of the Halifax Caledonian Club" *Hathi Trust Digital Library* (1861): 12. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=aeu.ark:/13960/t9t166k6b&view=1up&seq=12 (Accessed 4 April 2020).

12 Highland Society of Canada, "Rules of the Highland Society of Canada, a Branch of the Highland Society of London: With an Alphabetical List of the Members," *Internet Archive* (1843): 8. https://archive.org/details/cihm21924/page/n7/mode/2up (Accessed 4 April 2020): The North British Society was less concerned with Gaelicness than it was with incorporating an Anglo-Highlander culture.

13 James S. Macdonald, "Annals of the North British Society of Halifax, Nova Scotia for One Hundred and Twenty-five Years from its Foundation, 26th March, 1768, to the Festival of St. Andrew, 1893," *Canadiana* (1894): 6. http://www.canadiana.ca.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/view/oocihm.09400/11?r=0&s=1 (Accessed 4 April 2020).

14 Michael Vance, "A Brief History of Organized Scottishness in Canada," in *Transatlantic Scots*, ed. Celeste Ray (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005): 100. Vance goes on to say "by the end of [the 19th] century, the way one would signal arrival in the local Halifax elite was through membership in the North British Society".

15 Macdonald, "Annals, 1768-1903," 102-5, 518-9: Lord Selkirk visited Halifax on a North American trip in 1804, where he was accepted warmly. Lord Lorne became a patron during his tenure as Canada's governor general.

16 Tanja Bueltmann, *Clubbing Together: Ethnicity, Civility and Formal Sociability in the Scottish Diaspora to 1930* (Liverpool UK, Liverpool University Press, 2014): 107-10. Bueltmann

speaks here to the paternalistic charity practiced by most Scots societies; the North British Society was not different from other societies in those regards, however in Halifax it enjoyed more influence than other rival societies.

17 Lord Selkirk. "Lord Selkirk's Diary, 1803-1804: A Journal of His Travels in British North American and the Northeastern United States." *The Publications of the Champlain Society*, 35, ed. Patrick C.T. White. Toronto: The Champlain Society, (2013): 4-5. Accessed through The Champlain Society, 4 April 2020.

18 Macdonald, "Annals, 1768-1903," 519.

19 Ibid, 401, 414.

20 Macdonald, "Annals, 1768-1903," 519; Macdonald, "Annals… 1768, to the festival of St. Andrew, 1893," 90.

21 Macdonald, "Annals, 1768-1903," 259-60.

22 McCullough, "Building the Highland Empire," 115.

in 1859 provided great opportunities during which the North British Society could work with other organisations in advertising and asserting Scots culture to the public of Halifax.[23] The particular example of Robert Burns and the holiday celebrating his life and works pertains greatly to the idea of Scots culture being used to foster Imperial identity. In the case of Burns being used in a manner which celebrates both Scottishness and Empire, Ann Rigney highlights the complexity of the poet's legacy in play at the centenary when she writes, "while the principal frame in the Nova Scotian capital was Scottish, other imagined communities were also invoked as the need arose: Britishness, the empire, and the English-speaking world."[24] Thus, while ostensibly holding an event strictly in commemoration of a Scottish national hero, the North British Society was able to invoke the Empire an equal amount as they did Burns, with numerous toasts to the Queen-Empress and the Lieutenant Governor being featured with a speech during which he celebrated the Empire and its values.[25] St. Andrew's Day also presented an opportunity for the Society to throw celebration dinners to which the influential members of society would be invited.[26] At such dinners, honoured guests would come and sometimes make speeches of their pride in Scotland and its influence throughout the Empire—one need not be Scottish in a strict sense in order to say such things.[27] Indeed, events such as Burn's Day and St. Andrew's Day allowed for annual exhibitions through which the North British Society could flaunt its elite influence and use that influence toward publicising continued cultural unity with the motherland. More permanent celebrations of the values of the North British Society were achieved through investment in public monuments, which included the commissioning of a portrait of Prince Edward the Duke of Kent which would hang in Province House.[28] Through an admixture of hosting events and investing in the installation of physical monuments throughout the city of Halifax, the North British Society was able to engrain itself socially into Nova Scotia's capital even more so than it could by simply inviting the membership of the elite Scottish members of society.[29] Indeed, the population at large was

made aware of their province's perceived historical and ongoing Scottishness. Though fuelled by elites, the North British Society pushed through a message that all Nova Scotians were not simply a menagerie of colonials—they were Scots, they were Britons.

The North British Society thus acted as an agent of imperialism. Through the growth of the British Empire in its geographic and cultural scope during the Victorian era, the strengthening of cohesive identity became increasingly important. In British North America the Imperial machinations in forging British identity were seen in both successes and failures. The importance of maintaining strong ties to the Empire in the face of colonial desires for self-determination were evident in consideration of the provinces' proximity to the United States and the contemporary republican threats of the 1837-1838 Canadian Rebellions.[30] By establishing such a strong social presence as a charitable foundation as well as a cultural heritage organisation, the North British Society was able to achieve a third goal: the maintenance of British Imperial paternalism in the presence of Haligonians, Nova Scotians, and Canadians. Clearly, the Society viewed itself as having a special role in Halifax. In an excerpt from their Annals which encompasses the paternalist viewpoint of its members, the author writes "[t]he history and progress of our Society is so intimately entwined with the rise and progress of Halifax, that every public act of our organisation serves to recall some phrase of the growth of the city and the life of its people."[31] That viewpoint illustrates that the Society viewed itself as not simply serving the Scottish population of the city but rather the city in its entirety. Two major points should be highlighted as such, the Society served the entire city through its Scottish cultural exploits, and the result of those exploits was the city's success. Vance describes the notion that Scots identity was highly beneficial to British North American society well when he writes, "the ideals held by the Scottish element in the nation were essential if Canada was to resist the corrosive influence of the individualistic materialism emanating from the United States. Indeed, it was the Scots' patriotic duty to celebrate and promote Scottish influence".[32]

By asserting Scottishness as a creed of ideas and values rather than ethnic heritage, Scots societies were able to appeal broadly in an Imperial setting.[33] Furthermore,

23 Mr. Cochrane and Mr. Weeks, "Celebration of Burns' Centenary: Halifax, Nova Scotia, 25th January [sic], 1859," *Internet Archive* (1859): 3 https://archive.org/details/cihm14108/page/3/mode/2up (Accessed 4 April 2020).

24 Ann Rigney, "Embodied Communities: Commemorating Robert Burns, 1859," *Representations*, 115, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 91.

25 Cochrane and Weeks, "Celebration of Burns," 11-12.

26 Macdonald, "Annals… 1768, to the festival of St. Andrew, 1893," 348.

27 Ibid. A Lt. General from Ulster is said to have made such a speech at the St. Andrew's Day celebration mentioned in this excerpt.

28 Macdonald, "Annals, 1768-1903," 76-82; Macdonald, "Annals… 1768, to the Festival of St. Andrew, 1893," 349: Portraits were often commissioned of notable members and patrons of the Society; this excerpt mentions such portraits in describing the Society's investment in a permanent headquarters building.

29 The Scots, "The Scots Charitable Foundation," *The Scots,* http://www.thescots.ca/index.php/make-a-donation/the-scots-charitable-foundation (Accessed 4 April 2020); Nova Sco-

tia, *Memorandum of Understanding – The Scots & HRM – Victoria Park* (Halifax: Halifax Regional Council, 11 February, 2014): The North British Society, in modern times known simply as The Scots, is shown here to have put, and continue one putting, heavy investment on physical monuments to Scottish and British culture in Halifax. However, much of the more prominent statues and monuments were commissioned after the timeframe this paper discusses. Even so, it has invested in physical monuments since its inception. Notable monuments which resulted are the busts to Robert Burns and Walter Scott in Victoria Park.

30 Tom Dunning, "The Canadian Rebellions of 1837 and 1838 as a Borderland War: A Retrospective," *Ontario History*, 101, no. 2 (Autumn 2009): This article describes well those two threats and their interconnection.

31 Macdonald, "Annals, 1768-1893," 350.

32 Vance, "Organized Scottishness in Canada," 96-97.

33 Colin Kidd, "Race, Empire, and the Limits of Nineteenth-Century Scottish Nationhood,"

in the case of the North British Society, its appeal was so great that it was a major social feature of the upper classes of Nova Scotia.[34] That aspect of the Society's success may be attributed to its early foundation in the city, which may subsequently be attributed to the mythic Scottishness of the province.[35] The Scottish nature of Nova Scotia had its roots in a Royal Charter given to the Scottish Sir William Alexander in 1621 when the region was still under the French.[36] Accordingly, the culture of Halifax wasn't truly Scottish in nature until long after the North British Society was founded.[37] The entire premise of Nova Scotia is based around a Scottishness embedded in British Imperial identity; the North British Society was a reflection of the arbitrary strength of that Scottishness. The name bestowed on the organisation at its creation, North British, is emblematic of the appropriation of Scotland's distinct national culture into the British Imperial fold.[38] The immense amount of influence enjoyed by the North British Society in Nova Scotia was relatively disproportionate to the number of actual ethnic Scots in the province; its influence was rather a result of the pervasive ideas of Scottishness.[39] The contrived sense of Scottish identity, justified by the actual influx of Scottish immigrants in the early nineteenth century, was played up especially after those immigration levels died down in relative terms.[40] All that the appearance of actual Scottish immigrants provided was rhetorical justification for the publicly evident celebrations of that culture. The actual effect of those celebrations

was to further entrench the Imperial ties ingrained in that engineered Scottishness.

In the early Victorian era, as the British Empire grew in scale geographically and culturally, forging a generally unified Imperial identity was of great importance. Scottish Societies across the Empire helped in this endeavour due to their wide reach and easily identifiable attributes. Imperial Scottishness became more of an idea than strictly an ethnic attribute; the pervasive Highlander cultural presence in the military helped to extend it worldwide.[41] The North British Society in Halifax exemplified the attributes of an Imperially minded Scottish society perhaps greater than any other group. Its existence in an area imbued with a sense of mythic historical Scottish identity–as well as a considerable actual population of Scots–allowed for an amount of continuing prominent cultural relevance that few other societies could boast. Moreover, its membership could claim active representatives of the local provincial elite as well as honorary members and endorsements from Imperial aristocracy. Even non-Scottish members of the upper class in Halifax would find it presumably unavoidable in actively engaging with the Society.[42] Such prominent engagement allowed the Society to invest greatly in events celebrating Scottish holidays as well as physical monuments to Scottish figures. The North British Society was able to strengthen Imperial ties and foster a long-lasting identity of Scottishness in Halifax and Nova Scotia at large through its appeal to the community elites and subsequent investment in cultural awareness. The group's appeal beyond its home province is highlighted by its claimed position "as the Senior national benevolent association of the Dominion."[43]

§

The Historical Journal, 46, no.4 (December 2003): 876-8. Kidd in this excerpt discusses the flexibility of the Scottish race in establishing and enhancing its identity within the Imperial context.

34 David A. Sutherland, "Voluntary Societies and the Process of Middle-class Formation in Early-Victorian Halifax, Nova Scotia," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 5, no. 1 (1994): 241. This article illustrates how it was relatively rare for voluntary societies at that time to have such an active prominence among the "ruling elite". Thus, the North British Society was unique in those regards, as the prominent members of the elite such as the Lieutenant Governor were a constant presence.

35 Vance, "Powerful Pathos," 157.

36 Ibid.

37 Daniel Maudlin, "Architecture and Identity on the Edge of Empire: The Early Domestic Architecture of Scottish Settlers in Nova Scotia, Canada, 1800-1850," *Architectural History*, 50 (2007): 96. The arrival of the HMS Hector is highlighted as the beginning of Highland Scottish character in Nova Scotia, and that wasn't until about five years after the Society's founding.

38 Ward, *Britishness Since 1870*, 149.

39 Vance, "Powerful Pathos," 159. The disproportion is highlighted by Vance when he points out, "… Scots were outnumbered by those from other immigrant groups for the remainder of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, by the 1921 census Nova Scotians of Scottish origin represented just over 28 percent of the total population, while those of English origin constituted nearly 39 percent".

40 Vance, "Powerful Pathos," 159.

41 McCullough, "Founding the Highlander Empire," 106.

42 Macdonald, "Annals, 1768-1903," 259-60.

43 Macdonald, "Annals… 1768, to the Festival of St. Andrew, 1893," 350.

Bibliography

Brown, Andrew. "Discourse Delivered Before the North-British Society: in Halifax, Nova Scotia, at Their Anniversary Meeting on the 30th of November, 1790." *Internet Archive* (1791) https://archive.org/details/cihm_60175/page/n15/mode/2up (Accessed 4 April 2020).

Bueltmann, Tanja. *Clubbing Together: Ethnicity, Civility and Formal Sociability in the Scottish Diaspora to 1930*. Liverpool UK, Liverpool University Press, 2014.

Cochrane, Mr. and Mr. Weeks. "Celebration of Burns' Centenary: Halifax, Nova Scotia, 25th Januaay [sic], 1859." *Internet Archive* (1859) https://archive.org/details/cihm_14108/page/3/mode/2up (Accessed 4 April 2020).

Dunning, Tom. "The Canadian Rebellions of 1837 and 1838 as a Borderland War: A Retrospective." *Ontario History*, 101, no. 2 (Autumn 2009): 129.

Halifax Caledonian Club. "Constitution and Rules of the Halifax Caledonian Club." *Hathi Trust Digital Library* (1861) https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=aeu.ark:/13960/t9t166k6b&view=1up&seq=12 (Accessed 4 April 2020).

Highland Society of Canada. "Rules of the Highland Society of Canada, a Branch of the Highland Society of London: With an Alphabetical List of the Members." *Internet Archive* (1843) https://archive.org/details/cihm_21924/page/n7/mode/2up (Accessed 4 April 2020).

Kidd, Colin. "Race, Empire, and the Limits of Nineteenth-Century Scottish Nationhood." *The Historical Journal*, 46, no.4 (December 2003): 873-92.

Lord Selkirk. "Lord Selkirk's Diary, 1803-1804: A Journal of His Travels in British North America and the Northeastern United States." *The Publications of the Champlain Society*, 35. Ed. Patrick C.T. White. Toronto: The Champlain Society, 2013. Accessed through The Champlain Society, April 4, 2020.

Macdonald, James S. "Annals, North British Society, Halifax, Nova Scotia: with Portraits and Biographical Notes, 1768-1903." *Internet Archives* (1905) https://archive.org/details/annalsnorthbriti00nortuoft/page/n13/mode/2up (Accessed 4 April 2020).

___ ."Annals of the North British Society of Halifax, Nova Scotia for One Hundred and Twenty-five Years from its Foundation, 26th March, 1768, to the Festival of St. Andrew, 1893." *Canadiana* (1894) http://www.canadiana.ca.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/view/oocihm.09400/11?r=0&s=1 (Accessed 4 April 2020).

Maudlin, Daniel. "Architecture and Identity on the Edge of Empire: The Early Domestic Architecture of Scottish Settlers in Nova Scotia, Canada, 1800-1850." *Architectural History*, 50 (2007): 95-123.

McCullough, Katie. "Building the Highland Empire: The Highland Society of London and the Formation of Charitable Networks in Great Britain and Canada, 1779-1857." Phd diss. University of Guelph, 2014.

Nova Scotia. *Memorandum of Understanding – The Scots & HRM – Victoria Park.*

Halifax: Halifax Regional Council, 11 February 2014.

Rigney, Ann. "Embodied Communities: Commemorating Robert Burns, 1859." *Representations*, 115, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 71-101.

Sutherland, David A. "Voluntary Societies and the Process of Middle-class Formation in Early-Victorian Halifax, Nova Scotia." *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 5, no. 1 (1994): 237-63.

The Scots, "The Scots Charitable Foundation." *The Scots*. http://www.thescots.ca/index.php/make-a-donation/the-scots-charitable-foundation (Accessed 4 April 2020).

Vance, Michael. "A Brief History of Organized Scottishness in Canada." in *Transatlantic Scots*, 96-119. ed. Celeste Ray. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005.

___ . "Powerful Pathos: The Triumph of Scottishness in Nova Scotia." in *Transatlantic Scots*, 156-79. ed. Celeste Roy. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005.

Ward, Paul. *Britishness Since 1870.* London UK: Routledge, 2004.