Ourselves and Others
Scotland 1832–1914
GRAEME MORTON

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Where previous histories of this period have focused on industry, this book will take a closer look at the people who helped to innovate and forge Scottish national identity through technology and opportunity. Identity was a key element in explaining industrial Scotland, and cultural and technological innovations were melded into this foundry of a confident and self-determined nation.

GRAEME MORTON is the Scottish Studies Foundation Chair and Director of the Centre for Scottish Studies at the University of Guelph.
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Ourselves and Others
Scotland 1832–1914

Graeme Morton

EDINBURGH
University Press
For Angela, Sam and Evie; themselves living out of Scotland
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Acknowledgements

The patience of a publisher should, I think, go along with that of Job. This book was commissioned when its author was on one side of the Atlantic and completed, a little later than intended, on the other side of that ocean. I am, without reservation, indebted to Edinburgh University Press for persisting with me. As, too, did Jenny Wormald, the academic who waited. Thank you for being the most generous editor one could wish for. To Trevor Griffiths my profound appreciation for reading an earlier draft of this book and for the hospitality that makes my visits home the transatlantic equivalent of comfort eating. And to my family, including the furry and pedantic members, my thanks for reading as well as ‘being’ major parts of this book.
If there is an overused descriptor bestowed upon contemporary experiences, it was the ‘singularity’ of that society. As a metaphor for the age, it smacks of amazement, incredulity and historical inimitability. Historians are wont to impress the uniqueness of their period upon their readers, and to avoid disappointment such claims are made here. The span 1832 to 1914 is when the technology of modernity came firmly into view: the electric telegraph, the motorised omnibus and the sailing ship that no longer depended on nature to propel its passengers and cargo. Above all, the steam railway shrank the temporal distances criss-crossing the Scottish mainland as it did the connection to England and, through the country’s ports, passage to the wider world. Not that the Scottish people had ever been hermitic, but this was an age marked by the movement of people and the flow of information – both in and out of the nation.

The steam-powered rotary press brought down the cost of printing, increased the speed of publishers’ output and better helped the Scots to read about themselves and learn about others from any number of standpoints. Prior to 1830, 131 newspapers had been registered in Scotland. Over the next two decades, 169 new newspapers were established and more than 100 more were added each decade throughout the century. The unstamped press flourished around the time of franchise reform in 1832, with fifty-four of these publications in Glasgow alone. With a partial reduction in the cost of the stamp tax in 1840 and removal of that tax in 1855 the advent of daily news had
come. Periodicals were strongest in the first half of the century, regional newspapers in the second half. *The Orcadian* began publishing in 1854, *The Shetland Times* rolled out its first edition in 1872 and the Dundee publisher D. C. Thomson dominated the reading matter of Tayside and Fife after 1905 with its mixture of provincial newspapers and weeklies for women. The *Celtic Magazine* and other nineteenth-century periodicals – such as Tait’s and Blackwood’s (both Edinburgh), Fraser’s (London) and Harper’s (New York) – fed the minds of Scotland’s learned civil society. When *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* started in 1832 it quickly gained a readership of 80,000 before shifting focus to London under new editorship in the 1850s. But with a range of publishing houses on their doorstep, few others were compelled to follow the path south.

The evidence suggests Scotland was a more literate society than England, a consequence of its many schools (religious and secular), its universities and a civil society bulked and developed by early urbanisation. Publishing brothers William and Robert Chambers informed readers of their *Information for the People* (1856) that Scotland had long benefited from the advantage of a ‘universally diffused means of elementary education’. In their view it established the Scots as steadfast people, examples of fidelity and perseverance, each possessing ‘some tincture of literature’. While imagined from afar as preserving an essentially oral society – from which the much-translated ancient poetry of Ossian had sprung – the Scots would be more likely found reading their political economy, their tracts and their mechanical descriptions, nurtured under the guise of ‘improvement’. Begun in the 1840s, mechanics’ institutes drew members for the newspapers, periodicals and manuals stocked in their libraries and reading rooms, and for guidance to the manufacturing processes taught in their classrooms. Practical and prosaic, reading was not just for pleasure or debate.

Such pathways to learning enabled a wide array of contrasting ideas to penetrate, any choice of which will seem diverse: exiled from both Switzerland and France, the Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini established himself in England as a literary
commentator in 1837; Karl Marx published *Das Kapital* in 1867 written from his favourite seat in the British Library; Sherlock Holmes first pitted his intellect against London’s criminal fraternity in *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887; Peter Rabbit bounced quietly into print with a limited private edition of his *Tales* by author Beatrix Potter in 1901. Lauded by John Stuart Mill for giving a fresh perspective to Britain’s tendency toward cultural insularity, Mazzini was read in Scotland not least through his contributions to *Tait’s Magazine*. His one-time collaborator Giuseppe Garibaldi – who was likened to William Wallace – found that Oban Town Council had placed a steamer at his disposal so he might complete the ‘experience’ of touring Scotland in the 1850s by journeying to Staffa and Iona. Once *Das Kapital* had been translated into English in 1887, radicals and later socialists could read for themselves the ideas of the man they had learned about in the monthly journals *Modern Thought* and *Contemporary Review*, both London-based periodicals that circulated north of the border. Scottish-born Arthur Conan Doyle’s connections with the nation were impeccable; he lived at various addresses in Edinburgh before moving south, and based his detective on the forensic science of Dr Joseph Bell from Edinburgh University’s medical faculty. In contrast, but just as perceptive on human relations, Peter Rabbit was welcomed to Scotland from the Lake District. His *Tales*, a potential Christmas gift in 1902, left *The Scotsman*’s critic delighted with Peter’s childlike actions that were so appealing yet without ceasing to be those of a rabbit.

These stories and much more arrived to shape the culture of the Scots. Connection through the electric telegraph and the transatlantic cable mid-century meant this small north-western European nation was imbued increasingly deeply with values from other nations as well as those from its own people. When Paul Reuter moved to London in 1851 and made use of the new communication technology, he endeavoured to send news around the world, counting the Scottish newspapers amongst his clients. News from the agency that took his name was printed regularly in *The Scotsman*, in one instance reporting from Paris that the French royal family ‘mingled their regret and grief with
the Royal Family and the English nation’ for the death of the Prince Consort in 1861. The column also contained snippets from Prussia, Herzegovina, the Brazils and America, and reports on the Bombay Mail and the eruption of Vesuvius. Like nations on both sides of the Atlantic, the Scots were intrigued by the new communications. A lecture the next year on the technology of telegraphy by Major J. H. A. Macdonald, of the Edinburgh Rifle Volunteers, and in support of that regiment, explained the different approaches and exhibited part of the failed transatlantic cable which had a tendency to unravel because of the direction of the join – one twisted to the right, the other to the left – a problem confirmed by two independent assessors.

This singular age in Scotland’s history can be pitched as opening the nation to the movement of people, ideas and information more intensely than before. There was nothing static or moribund here, even for the most immobile handloom weaver, stable lad or domestic servant. Strangers, travellers, tramps, tourists and economic migrants were commonplace, as Chapter 6 and Chapter 11 will show. News was circulating, and it was more recent news than their grandparents’ generation would have known. News, indeed, had become an industry. Information was packaged and manufactured just as any piece of wrought iron or woollen hose added value to the raw materials they comprised. These Scots had the means to know more about themselves than their forebears knew about themselves. They especially had greater opportunity to learn about others, whether they resided inside the nation or outside its boundaries. Being Scottish was not simply being other than English or being other than Catholic. Being Scottish was not a rejection of the unknown, but a reflection of the known. In this age of deepening information flows, the nation’s history was in dialogue with the nation’s identities.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF OBJECTIFICATION

Very lightly, this book will make use of objectification theory to frame its analysis. Borrowed from gender studies, the theory
is formed to show how society objectifies women to separate their sexuality from their personality. In turn it leads to self-objectification, where the observer’s perspective is internalised and taken to be one’s own. The French philosopher Michel Foucault explains how objectification is achieved by dividing sections of society into distinct groups, by the application of (claimed) scientific classification and then by the subjectification of self. By believing in how others have objectified our history, by the self-objectification of that view because it is presented to us rationally, we internalise ourselves as subjects and deny our own agency. For good reason the late Victorian theorist Ernest Renan explained that getting history wrong is essential to how nations are formed.

To better explore Scotland’s history and identity during the rise of modernity, self-objectification will be used to analyse the inter-relationship of ourselves and others. The evidence comes from what contemporaries thought was happening, and what it meant for them as a people, and what they thought of ‘others’ both inside and outside the nation. By the same token, it is a reflection of what contemporaries external to the nation thought was going on in Scotland, and thought they knew about the Scots, and what they told the Scots about themselves.

Such echoes may be artifice; these observations may be distortions; the contemporary conclusion may be misplaced. So this intellectual interchange will be presented alongside the socio-economic history of a near century of transformation. As much as *Ourselves and Others* is a narrative history book, it is story formed in the interplay of personal identity (*myself*), the framework of the nation (*ourselves*) and the knowledge of others.

**A YEAR OF BEGINNINGS**

In both Scotland’s and Britain’s capital cities, the discussion of 1832 was all about politics, and in particular the ‘Nation’s Bill’. *The Times* caught the mood:
Everything now announces that this great restorative of a decayed constitution will be realized. The Sovereign is, as he ever was, staunch to his conviction, and to his Royal word once given: in the Cabinet there is not a shadow of difference upon the course to be pursued. The people of Great Britain are alike unanimous; what, then, can an expiring party do?

The Parliamentary Reform of 1832 – expanding the franchise to allow those owning property to the value of £10 to vote in general elections – was enacted by separate English and Scottish legislation. It pulled proportionately more Scots into the voting booths and produced a system for both countries that was more reflective of recent population settlement. The Reform also invigorated the link between politics, a progressively dominant industrial economy and the new media nurtured by civil society.

In the interpretation of *The North American Review* in January 1832, reform of Westminster was ‘an American question’, not one simply for the people of Scotland or England. This was not for the principles of democracy, but for the commercial relations that crossed the Atlantic. Those whose income and wealth came from trade and industrial endeavour had pushed for political power to be opened and while the British electoral system had led the world with this initial expansion, ground was steadily lost. America, Australia, New Zealand, Russia and Germany all widened their electorate later but then more extensively than Britain. Indeed, most adult Scots had no entitlement to vote for or against their government. In 1911, only 54 per cent of men in Glasgow (and 60 per cent of men for the whole of Scotland) were entitled to vote. Women lacked even that, despite the increasingly vociferous campaigning of the suffrage movement from 1867. Women ratepayers could vote in Scottish burgh elections in 1884, in county elections in 1894 and in parish council elections in 1894 (the only instance of the three where they could stand for office). The position of town councillor was a privilege open only to men until 1907 as was that of county councillor until 1914. Scottish women
in some parts of the diaspora were granted the legislative vote earlier than their sisters, mothers and daughters back home: in New Zealand (1893), in Australia (standardised under the Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902, while indigenous women remained excluded) and in Canada (1917). In 1918 women over the age of thirty who owned property could cast their vote at a British general election, but not until 1928 were women and men enfranchised equally.

CHOLERA: MORIBUS AND SPASMODIC

Concurrent with the agitation around electoral reform, throughout 1832 the people had a new threat to deal with. It came from cholera, and it caused fear for the ease with which it had spread since its first appearance the previous December. To some, the consequences of the disease were being overstated, more mirage than reality, a political tool used to stifle free discussion amongst the working classes and to further impose external morality on their behaviour. When The Loyal Reformers’ Gazette told its Glasgow-dominated readership that this new health scare was but a distraction from the Reform debate, they argued it gave the Tories reason to delay action in Westminster. With an average monthly death rate of twenty to thirty in Edinburgh, cholera did not seem especially virulent. In Glasgow, 106 cases resulted in forty-six deaths. For England and Scotland combined in the year, there were 5,064 cases reported and 1,496 deaths confirmed from the disease. The Gazette, in spiteful jest, even offered a cure:

Take a full and fair representation of the people, the whole people, and nothing but the people; let the House of Commons, this chosen, immediately reduce the taxes; let the poor obtain cheap bread, wholesome food, and warm clothing, in exchange for their labour, and thus they will defy the Cholera.

It was a debate about social class, with consumption and typhus associated with the undernourished poor, whereas until understanding developed in the 1860s of how cholera was transmitted
through contaminated water, that disease induced panic across the social orders. Despite the Gazette’s accusation that they were mere operatives of the state for their intervention into the cleanliness, intemperance and eating habits of the poor, the Scottish medical profession took a line that marked a difference from the sanitary strategies introduced in the English towns and cities. They encouraged ventilation in housing and discouraged people from going out at night when the disease was present. The Boards of Health of Dundee and Edinburgh asked the populace to eat before leaving the house, to dress more warmly than usual and to avoid large gatherings of other working-class people, even at church.

Spasmodic cholera had been long known in India and contemporaries traced the current problem to a particularly virulent attack that moved to Calcutta in September 1817. The disease then spread throughout the regions and into the army, causing watery purging, first without pain, then sickness, then pain rising up from the toes, through the legs and inducing a burning in the stomach, with death coming within four to six hours of onset. It moved to Persia in 1821, the Mediterranean in 1823, Tehran in 1828, Georgia in 1830, then ravaged the Russian and Polish armies in the spring of that year. Paris was badly affected, and by October the disease had made its way to Sunderland and into an emigrant ship spotted at New Ross in Ireland. London at this point was only mildly affected, and various reasons were posited: their meat diet, perhaps, or the sulphur from their coal? Was it the narrow and thickly populated areas that experienced its effects more widely than the wider-built areas? In Scotland, East Lothian saw some of the earliest cases of the disease, in Musselburgh, Tranent and Prestonpans. It seemed to miss some regions completely, to travel great distances without losing its virulence, to backtrack on itself and to spread against the prevailing winds. It was made worse in Musselburgh because of the presence of typhus before and during the epidemic, while in Prestonpans, the beggars, colliers and ‘dissipated persons’ were most afflicted.
Figure I.1  Cholera! No public begging permitted in Paisley, 1832. © Renfrewshire Council, Local Studies Library. Licensor www.scran.ac.uk
SPINNING THE INDUSTRIAL THREAD

While franchise reform was a positive reinforcement of the growing influence of capitalists and industrialists, the movement of Scotland’s trade around the world carried the threat of previously unseen diseases landing along with passengers and cargo. The Scottish economy of the 1830s was filled with latent transformative power. This came with the partial replacement of industry around textiles with processes powered by coal and steam.

Mechanisation and the factory were to become the new mark of Scotland’s economy; iron, steel, chemicals and shipbuilding fired a small nation to increase its GDP by 10 per cent, close enough to England’s lead and well in front of Germany, the Netherlands, France, Italy and Austria. It was an uneven story, as Chapter 6 shows, and small industrialists continued apace. Indeed, even the largest concerns were dependent on human capital rather than physical plant. Around one million more jobs were created during the period in focus here, but wages remained some 10–20 per cent lower than for similar work in England. The near constant movement in search of work was the norm for most, and for many that journey took them overseas.

SCOTT IS DEAD. LONG LIVE SCOTT-LAND

One who opposed the Reform legislation but welcomed the economic benefits of political union with England was the celebrated novelist Sir Walter Scott. His narrative and poetic writings were to define the age with their mixture of romance, Jacobitism and historical reflection. The year 1832, however, marked his death. The first stroke came in February 1831, a second shortly after and a third more serious one in April, as his daughter Anne recounted:

Papa is recovering slowly, but mere acquaintance would think him quite well. In mind he has always been the same. In this last attack he has never lost it, but I think his speech is not quite right yet.
Indeed, till it comes round the disease is still, I fear, hanging about him. He is very irritable, and will not believe but it has been my insisting on him being bled that has made him ill.

Scott’s failing health was headline news around the world and of concern to monarchs and compatriots alike. In October Scott travelled to the Mediterranean, given passage on a man-o’-war at the insistence of King William. The Scotsman thought it necessary to report on letters that had arrived from Malta on 24 November 1831 announcing that Scott had survived the journey and the general improvement in his health. In January, he was presented to the King of Naples who offered to order any excavation of Pompeii that he may desire. Instead Sir Walter chose a trip to Athens, with Sir Frederick Adam offering passage on a government steamer for his convenience. On hearing of the presentation, the satirist within the Pittsburgh Gazette suggested the ‘King of Naples has the honor of being presented to Sir Walter Scott’. The novelist began his return in May of that year, but suffered a fourth stroke in Nijmegen, delaying his return to Scotland. In June, under ‘English news’, his state of health was reported in Courrier de la Louisiane, a daily published in New Orleans. The fulfilment of his wish that he return to Abbotsford was reported in the American & Commercial Daily Advertiser, and under ‘European News’ the likelihood that Scott’s life would soon end was reported in the Geneva Gazette. Scott died at his Abbotsford home on 21 September 1832 at around 1.30 p.m. This was the passing of a celebrity. The obituary for the ‘wizard of the north’ was reproduced worldwide. The Pittsburgh Gazette heard ‘a universal echo this side of the Atlantic’ for his mourning. The Connecticut Courant copied its account of Scott’s celebrated life from The Times and Fraser’s Magazine, explaining that the major events in his life were so known to the world that they did not need repeating.

Despite Sir Walter’s passing, Scott-land continued apace. Boosted by the quixotic descriptions in Marmion and Lady of the Lake especially, foreign visitors and others had long been attracted to Scott’s romanticisation of the west coast to gaze
upon a coastline and a people that were ‘unchanged’, appeared unworldly and offered a looking glass into an earlier time. This the outsider contrasted with their own life: of towns, fashion, of being fashionable and an intellectual exchange so different from the people one nodded recognition to at the church hall, the coffee house or the dinner club.

The ever-quotable English critic Dr Samuel Johnson, encouraged by his Scottish-born companion and biographer James Boswell, was an earlier tourist in search of authenticity. The tales of the Hebridean poet Ossian were a sensation from 1760 via the antiquarianism and writings of James Macpherson (1736–96). It created Europe-wide shorthand of what Scotland and its people were to those looking in from afar. Johnson made this judgement despite A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland (1775) being published at the zenith of the Scottish Enlightenment. Ossian was at the centre of ‘sublime existence’, offering a guide to travellers in search of a ‘physical’ or a ‘metaphysical’ experience. Another who came was the composer Felix Mendelssohn. The year was 1829 and he was twenty years of age. Mendelssohn had followed the path of romantics before him, braving seasickness to take the small rowing boat to the island of Staffa, located in the Hebrides off Scotland’s western coastline. The cave became his inspiration to write The Hebrides Overture (Fingal’s Cave) the next year and then The Scottish Symphony, although it would be another dozen years before it was finished. Mendelssohn, like the others, came looking for Scotland and for the Scots. His music would be his discovery, objectifying Scotland’s pre-modern past into aural shorthand for the pleasure of a modern society. Like Scott-land, The Hebrides Overture summarised its subject.

SEEING OURSELVES AS OTHERS SEE US

These visitors were in search of landscape and emotion, of essential Scotland more than the everyday Scot. But what did the people look like in this period? Their clothing and fashion are examined in Chapter 7, most of it remarkably uniform.
Their physical features are not so easily catalogued. One English art critic’s description of the Scots comes from Lady Eastlake, who gave some thought to this question in her diary entries for 1844:

On first returning to Scotland you are struck with two prominent national physiognomies. The one, the accepted type of the Scottish face – long in the chin and high in the cheeks; the features large, all but the eyes, and as ill put together as the limbs of the body; the upper lip turning out, and as large as the lower one; the hair reddish-grey, straggling, and coarse; the skin tight and freckled, and the working of every bone in the face seen under it. But occasionally good teeth and good humour enliven the face: honesty you expect from it, and vulgarity you are not surprised at; much sense and no vice are to be found in it. The other is very different; but, I fancy, equally Scotch. A small, well-set head, going up straight from the back, with clean-cut, sharp, hard features; small, light, and very red-lipped mouth, the long slender nose rather drawing it upwards; complexion clear, with a set colour; hair black and plentiful, and deepest eyes of a peculiarly dark slate colour, with a fine, tight-skinned, slightly wrinkled brow, which looks as if it worked hard for its owner. A face of no softness and no openness, but intensely shrewd and intellectual, and one which you are long in trusting and never tire of examining. The women have, many of them, wide open faces, with their features, the moment they speak, flopping back like the borders of their caps.

Other descriptions flowed from cultural stereotypes. *Punch*, for example, tended to eschew the simian features it assigned for the Catholic Irish and instead used highland garb in its satire to distinguish all Scots from ourselves. Scientists also offered some descriptions. John Beddoe’s presidential address to the Anthropological Society in 1872 reflected on Scottish ethnicity and its association with national identity:

Blood may rule the physique, but climate and other media, and linguistic, religious and other history all act, of course, upon the character and sympathies of a people; and as personal identity has been affirmed to consist in the consciousness of personal identity, so it might be argued, not without some appearance of plausibility, that
national identity consisted merely in the consciousness of national identity.

Beddoe’s earlier work had seemingly identified a distinctive distribution of eye and hair colours, with light hair and eyes in the east, especially the south-east, light eyes and dark hair in the west, and an increase in darker shades in the towns and cities. Much of this research was impressionistic, and in 1908 Beddoe unsuccessfully employed colour cards to measure and debate J. F. Tocher’s observations the previous year on the connection between physical characteristics and insanity. Tocher had studied over 50,000 school children to discover the preponderance of red hair in the north-east of Scotland, precisely the area where most asylums were to be found.

This research in turn built on John Cleghorn’s 1868 inquiry into whether Scottish character could be deduced from the attributes of the soil. Cleghorn attempted to compare Scots in the east with those in the west, and to compare the Scots with the English. Findings from Board of Trade returns showed him there was little difference between the amount of corn and the number of cattle and sheep under cultivation throughout Scotland, but their value was greater in the east than in the west: ‘The want of soil, the want of food, on the west, is further seen in the Gaelic, for it and heather go together’. Confidently he stated that the ‘east man is taller and his head bigger’ than his western counterpart. In the east there have been religious revolutions, but in the west they ‘move in masses’ – where ‘Papacy is the religion of poverty’. His answer for progress was to mix up the soil and mix up the species, because the ‘character of the Scotch is the expression of the soil of Scotland’. Respondents to the paper were not wholly convinced with his classifications, however, conjuring up examples throughout Continental Europe where the soil was similar but the character different.

In these examples of seeing ourselves as others see us, Scott, Mendelssohn, Eastlake, Beddoe, Tocher and Cleghorn all sought to objectify Scotland by dividing the nation into distinct groups: a Jacobite heart and sublime landscape by Scott; an aural Ossian
by Mendelssohn; the nation’s physiognomies by Eastlake, Beddoo and Tocher; the character of the nation formed from its soil by Cleghorn. Through the rationalisation of these classifications – and the historical, cultural, aural and scientific objectification of Scotland – the national self was subjugated, historical agency was downplayed and Scottish identity was formed.

WE MOVE ON

_Ourselves and Others_ is a social history based on a question so simple yet so difficult to answer: who were the Scots? When we look at the great changes that took place in Scotland, and explore the factors affecting how many Scots were being born, the rate at which they died, the numbers who left for a life elsewhere, those who returned and those who came from other countries, we are moved to try to understand the lives of the Scottish people and those who lived in Scotland. Consciously, this is a history of Scots within the nation, within Britain, and also distant of Scotland.

The chapters are set out to investigate Scotland as a society structured by its institutions, its economy and its political and constitutional framework, along with multifarious customs, beliefs and accepted ways of doing things. The denominational differences within Protestantism, and Presbyterianism most especially, and the growth in the number of Irish Catholics mid-century were reflected in marriage, childbirth, illegitimacy and social mores, as well as cultural control and legal and social punishment. Religious beliefs and practices structured many different aspects of lives that were ordinary as well as the experiences of extraordinary people in this period. And the churches, too, structured the lives of Scots overseas. The number of Presbyterian churches to be found throughout the ‘new world’ is testament to that, with by comparison nary an Anglican church to be found in the Maritime Provinces of Prince Edward Island or Nova Scotia, for example. But this is also evidenced by a debate that strained the Free Church of Scotland immediately after its creation in 1843: should it take much-needed
financial help from Scottish slave owners in the southern states of America, or was that help tainted beyond its monetary value?

Ourselves and Others is a blended history of the Scots in a period of major transformation. It is not about ‘the other’, for that is only part of how life was envisaged and identities were formed. ‘Being Scotland’ is about the blend itself. We do not simply reflect ourselves in England’s economic and constitutional development or in Ireland’s Roman Catholicism; we are part of that development, as it is part of us, of being Scottish within the united kingdom of Britain. The wearing of multiple hats – one or another, but never more than one at a time – or imagining identities as if they were a Russian doll – each self-contained but subsumed beneath a larger identity – was not being Scotland in the 1832–1914 period. There was no zero-sum or sliding scale here. Rather, it was a relentless eddy of historical developments from home and away, some engaged with completely, most only elliptically; in other words a blend of our history with a chaser of others.