Introduction: Overlooking *Mrs. Brown* Within Scottish Cinema Historiography

This article is concerned with *Mrs. Brown* (John Madden, 1997), a domestically produced Scottish film that tells the story of the scandalously close relationship between Queen Victoria (Judi Dench) and her Scottish ghillie John Brown (Billy Connolly) after the death of Victoria’s husband Prince Albert. A structuring assumption of this article is that despite being popular and well received critically at the time of its release, the film has yet to receive the substantial scholarly attention that it merits. Within writing on Scottish cinema, the film has heretofore garnered only a brief mention in a historical survey, a review of the film in *Sight and Sound* and a short analysis in a dossier publication. British film scholarship has paid greater attention to the film, but the terms in which it has done so are resolutely English. Kara McKechnie and to a lesser extent Julianne Pidduck have written about *Mrs. Brown* within such a framework, focusing on how the film depicts the life of Queen Victoria and comparing it to other depictions of English monarchs such as Herbert Wilcox’s films about Victoria, *Victoria the Great* (1937) and *Sixty Glorious Years* (1938), as well as *The Madness of King George* (Nicholas Hytner, 1994) and *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (Alexander...
Korda, 1933). Such analyses are useful as far as they go, but have precious little to say about how the film represents Scotland and Scottishness. In this regard, British film scholars are following the lead of the film’s popular reception which, influenced by the death of Princess Diana just before the film’s release in the US, saw the film as one centred on the travails of being a British royal in a world dominated by celebrity-obsessed mass media.

This article thus has two interrelated goals. One of these is to argue that the film is one with a great deal to say about Scottish history and national identity, including the relationship of Scotland to Great Britain and indeed acts as a kind of allegory of Anglo-Scottish relations. Understanding this dimension of the film will be shown to be especially significant given the historical backdrop of the production itself, that being the political devolution of Scotland. The second, ultimately successful, devolution referendum was held in 1997, and the influence this event and the attendant debates within the United Kingdom were at least as important to the film as the multitude of royal scandals that are commonly thought to inform the film’s presentation of the Queen and her family. My second goal pertains specifically to Scottish film historiography which, in the process of building a canon of important Scottish films, has given Mrs. Brown only the most cursory of treatments. As will be seen, the reasons for this neglect can be traced back to the film’s aesthetic and industrial contexts as well as the film’s interpretation of history and proud assertion of national difference using the discourse of tartanry, a discourse that is typically seen within Scottish cinema studies as a form of “incorrect Scottishness.” The article will thus conclude with an assessment of the ways in which nationalist goals have undermined Scottish film historiography’s ability to account for important films such as Mrs. Brown.

**Heritage Aesthetics and National Allegory**

In many ways, Mrs. Brown is a film about national differ-
ence and Anglo-Scottish relations. This section of the article will be concerned with demonstrating how the film handles these themes on a textual level as well as how similar themes can be seen in the reception of the film by the British media. A necessary point of departure for this analysis is the so-called heritage film, a genre of film-making that features prominently in British cinema since the 1980s and which remains highly controversial in British and Scottish film circles. The heritage film is a type of costume drama that in its British manifestation is typified by the works of producer Ismail Merchant and director James Ivory, including *A Room With a View* (James Ivory, 1985) and *Howards End* (James Ivory, 1992). Though there is still a great deal of controversy regarding this category of film-making, the genre is one with highly developed and standardized stylistic conventions as well as a history of criticism on ideological grounds from scholars who consider it to be politically regressive in nature. While I will have more to say later regarding critical antipathy towards the heritage film (particularly within Scottish film studies), for the time being I will be concerned with three stylistic dimensions of the heritage film: visual style, acting and costume. As we will see, by manipulating these generic conventions, *Mrs. Brown* is able to construct a national allegory about the relationship between Scotland and England, often while also mobilizing and skilfully manipulating Scottish representational discourses.

Heritage film-making in the core works of the 1980s and 1990s is distinguished from much previous costume drama by its painstaking attention to period detail and historical accuracy in creating simulacra of the past through set design, costume and other elements of mise-en-scène. These meticulous recreations are then showcased through a particular visual style, one described succinctly by Andrew Higson, who notes that in heritage films “camerawork generally is fluid, artful and pictorialist, editing slow and undramatic. The use of
long takes and deep focus, and long and medium shots rather than close-ups, produces a restrained aesthetic of display.” As Sarah Neely has shown, such an aesthetic is present in *Mrs. Brown* and it is associated almost exclusively with the film’s English characters. Victoria and her attendants, especially early in the film, are seen mainly in either interior shots in the decorous rooms of “heritage” locations such as Balmoral or Osbourne House, and when they do venture out of doors they are seen in medium and long shots as they walk in the ornate gardens of either estate.

Brown, in contrast, is associated with the outdoors and with a mise-en-scène dominated by rugged, natural landscapes. In his first appearance in the film, for example, he is framed against the rocky shores of the Isle of Wight complete with choppy seas lashing the coast. When he does appear in “heritage” spaces, Brown acts as a disruptive force. This can be seen in a sequence early in the film when Brown, having offended the Queen with his frank comments about her bereaved emotional state, decides to force the Queen to make use of his services by waiting with the Queen’s pony in the courtyard, an act which is viewed by the court as open disobedience and a breach of proper conduct. The sequence begins with the camera moving placidly through the sculpted hedges and lawn ornaments of the garden and comes to follow several nurses and children, the group wanders through the garden until they meet Brown who is waiting with the pony. The interruption of courtly manners by Brown is represented by means of a marked break from the camera style which has been in usage for much of the sequence and the film as a whole, as the camera stops on Brown and moves in from a medium shot to a close-up of his and the pony’s faces, depriving the viewer of the finery of the garden which customarily marks the heritage mise-en-scène.

Another way in which Brown disrupts what would have been conventional heritage visual style is
seen by the fact that all of the (very rare) occurrences of hand-held camera in the film – which are jolting within the context of the smooth, steady camera style of the film as a whole – coincide with Brown, whether he is running through the wilderness with a pistol or fighting with the ruffians in the stables at Balmoral. Such a camera style corresponds to Brown’s vigorousness and physicality which are juxtaposed with the stiffness and rigidity of his English counterparts. This can be seen in the film’s matching swimming scenes in which we see first the Queen and then later Brown go swimming. In the first of these we see the Queen and the princesses, clad in very covering Victorian bathing suits and filmed using static camera shots, go into the still, tranquil water. When we see Brown and his brother Archie (Gerald Butler) go swimming, on the other hand, the shots are hand-held and rapidly edited as the camera follows them as they leap naked into the choppy waters. The contrast between the two leads is clear: nudity and vigour on Brown’s part versus restrictive dress and rigidity on the part of the Queen. What is important for our current purposes, however, is to note the differing camera styles associated with each character. Awareness of this aspect of the film’s style helps us to appreciate the ways in which the film uses visual style to subtly communicate changes in the characters and their relationship to one another from this point on.

The crisis with which the film opens and which motivates the Queen’s advisors to summon Brown to the Royal household at Osbourne House is one in which the Queen finds herself unable to assume her public duties. This is represented stylistically in the film by means of visual stasis and entrapment within Osbourne House. The extent to which Brown’s dynamism is presented as desirable and indeed necessary in the film is encapsulated in its opening shots. Following the opening title cards which situate us historically and give us the biographical context necessary for understanding the
film’s plot, we see a bust falling in slow-motion from the edge of a castle. Such an opening immediately creates a sense of crisis for the monarchy as the heritage-esque sculpture cascades and crashes on the ground, shattering. This sense of crisis is amplified by the feeling that the bust must be that of Albert, as we have just been told of his recent death. (We later find out that it actually is the sculpture of Brown that the Queen commissioned, and which her son Bertie [David Westhead] has destroyed in celebration of his death.) This is followed by a jump-cut to Brown, identifiably Scottish as he is clad in his kilt (more on this below), running through the night, pistol in hand. Cutting from slow motion to the hand-held, frenetic and disorienting camera work which characterizes the shots of Brown charging through the forest, creates a jarring effect, especially as a scene of such action would not be among the expectations of viewers watching a costume drama in 1997. Brown shouts “God save the Queen” and fires into the darkness, and we flash back to 1861 and the beginning of his and Victoria’s story. With the sequence’s foreboding tone and the image of this Scotsman rushing out into the darkness to confront whatever force is supposed to be threatening the Royal household, this sequence establishes the energy and vigour of Connolly’s Brown as seemingly the only force protecting the monarchy.

As the film progresses, Brown’s movement and energy will come to be portrayed as the antidote to the Queen’s frozen, static crisis. A tentative first encounter takes place when Brown slowly leads the Queen away from the palace and into the woods. Both visual style – in this case, increased but steady movement as the camera swoops from above the house to follow the pair – and mise-en-scène, with Brown and Victoria moving through the sculpted garden off into a less carefully tended copse in the woods, underscore the gradual movement of the Queen’s affections towards Brown. The high point of their friendship later in the film comes as they ride
through the Highland hills at Balmoral. The camera style here shows a nearly perfect, in the film’s terms, synthesis between Brown’s dynamism and the heritage concerns for displaying attractions as the camera sweeps through the Highland landscape following the pair at a greater speed than seen earlier and yet still with enough perspective to appreciate the grandeur of the landscape scenery which the film has associated with Brown. Later in the film, when we return to the scene showing Brown charging out into the darkness around Buckingham Palace, the same hand-held camera sequence from the film’s opening, we see the balance in style has been lost as a series of disorienting, visually jarring shots create a sense of confusion and uncertainty. This mirrors Brown’s mental state as his mania for protecting the Queen has consumed him and his energy, once the elixir for both he and the Queen, is now destroying him. As for the Queen, she was last seen before this sequence, sitting at the head of an ornate dining table unable to acknowledge Brown personally for saving her life. She has returned to the stasis from which Brown had tried to rescue her.

Another core element of heritage film style that is significant for understanding *Mrs. Brown* is the reliance of the genre on certain acting and casting conventions. As Higson points out, the presence of a relatively small group of theatrically-trained British actors, including Helena Bonham Carter, Anthony Hopkins and others, is central to the genre’s appeal.¹⁰ Such actors are respected throughout the world for their abilities to convey complex emotional states through subtle uses of voice and gesture. Put simply, such actors are seen as embodying “the best of British acting.”¹¹ *Mrs. Brown* adheres to this convention by virtue of the casting of Judi Dench and her skilled performance as Victoria as well as the casting of other British theatrical actors in supporting roles, such as Anthony Sher (who plays a memorable Disraeli) and Geoffrey Palmer (who plays Ponsonby). Though this was Dench’s first leading role in the cinema, it came after a
long career on the English stage and in television, most notably on the sitcom *As Time Goes By* (1992-2005). Dench had also played a number of supporting roles in canonical heritage films such as *A Room with a View* (James Ivory, 1987) and *Henry V* (Kenneth Branagh, 1989). Such a career has led Higson to include her amongst his list of the repertory players of heritage cinema in Britain12 (a group which also includes Geoffrey Palmer), and led to an appointment as Dame Commander of the British Empire in 1985. This title has since been taken up frequently by the journalistic media in reviewing her work, as she is now commonly known as “Dame Judi.”

Whereas the English characters are played by theatrically-trained, “heritage” actors, Brown is played by Billy Connolly, a casting decision which draws on Connolly’s persona as a working-class Scottish comedian who is widely known to have worked in a Glaswegian shipyard before moving into the world of comedy. In light of his persona as an outspoken, working-class Clydeside Scot, and his career as an often obscene comedian, Connolly’s casting alongside Dench is a very significant one for the allegorical reading of the film which I am putting forward. The pairing of Dench, arch-English stage actress, and Connolly, an actor who embodies a certain stereotype of Scottish working-class masculinity, lends the film an international, class-crossing character. Such can be seen in the press coverage of an altercation at the film’s Edinburgh Film Festival premier involving Connolly and a reporter from a Scottish newspaper. Reports on the incident invariably mention that the incident occurred in front of “Dame Judi” Dench, implying shockingly inappropriate behaviour on the part of Connolly in front of such a regal personality as Dench.13 The pairing also brings an element of pan-Britishness to the film, as noted by one reviewer who described the two actors as showing “two sides of the same coin - the heads and tails of the kingdom.”14
In the film, the contrast in the personae of the respective actors translates into contrasting performance styles. Again we can look to generic conventions to describe and analyze this difference. John Caughie in his work on costume drama on British television (which *Mrs. Brown* began its life as) gives a particularly insightful description of the appeal of such “quality” acting, when he writes of the:

> [P]leasure in watching performance rather than the more seductive pleasure of losing oneself in the fantasy of identification: a pleasure in the observation of the details of gesture and inflection, in watching skill with the relaxed judgement detachment and critical judgement which Brecht associates with the aficionado of boxing.\(^1^6\)

The kind of showy acting that Caughie sees as characterizing performances such as Peggy Ashcroft’s in *The Jewel in the Crown* also characterizes Dench’s performance in *Mrs. Brown*. One such instance that is brief enough to discuss here is the scene in which Victoria seeks out the advice of the Dean of Windsor (Oliver Ford Davies) about the guilt she feels over her relationship with Brown. For reasons of rank and title, the Queen cannot speak directly to the Dean regarding her mixed feelings of attraction to Brown and guilt towards Albert’s memory. So Dench must communicate this subtext through indirect, opaque dialogue that allows Victoria to avoid speaking directly. The conflicting feelings apparent when Dench’s voice catches in her throat while saying that she has “come to rely more on the comfort of living friends” are moving to the audience in that they are able to both appreciate the extent of emotional repression the Queen is feeling, but are also able to delight in Dench’s ability to convey so much with these slight gestures and modulations of voice, to dab her eyes with a handkerchief.
when we realize her character must want to break down sobbing. It is little wonder then that Dench received the BAFTA and Golden Globe awards for Best Actress and was nominated for an Oscar in the same category: not only is her performance highly skilled, but the film’s appeal is largely based on it, something Miramax chief Harvey Weinstein was very aware of as he aggressively campaigned for the film and Dench individually to be nominated for Oscars.  

Billy Connolly’s performance as Brown, on the other hand, is seemingly not marked by the subtlety or nuance found in the performances of the English actors. Petrie says of the film’s acting styles that Connolly’s “energetic performance” overshadows “the longeurs” of “typical heritage style.” McKechnie also notes this divide in performance styles, saying “There is a very poignant contrast between the refined southern English courtiers and the ruddy Scotsman, who ‘speaks as he finds’ and seems to be the embodiment of [quoting Robert Burns] ‘the honest man, tho’ e’er sae poor, [who is] King o’ Men, for a’ that’.” Leaving aside the tartanry-charged usage of Burns by McKechnie, there is much truth in these characterizations, especially when it comes to contrasting Englishness and Scottishness. Moreover, I would argue that though Brown is a Highlander, Connolly’s performance actually imports a great deal of the actor’s hard-drinking and fighting Clydeside persona into the character. Brown says exactly what’s on his mind and, although it initially shocks the Queen, it ultimately charms her and leads to the casual intimacy between the two. The extent to which this is presented by the film as a Scottish character trait is seen early in the film when Brown’s brother Archie warns him about his lack of manners in directly addressing the Queen. Brown defends his speaking out of turn at the first meeting with the Queen in the film, saying “I speak as I find Archie;” Archie responds, “Not down South you don’t John.” Brown’s bluntness and often boisterous tone of voice also
highlight a class divide which accompanies the cultural divide between the Scottish and English in the film. It is a symptom of Brown’s mix of Highland rebelliousness and (via Connolly’s performance) Glaswegian working-class masculinity in the film that he cannot conform to the world of polite English upper-class society.

But this is only part of Connolly’s performance as Brown. At times in the film, Brown poignantly struggles to express himself in the formal dialogue that characterizes courtly communication. One instance of this comes when Brown attempts to resign his post following the scandal caused by his alleged involvement in a drunken fight; another comes when he must assume the proverbial “stiff upper lip” when hearing his work in stopping an assassination attempt denigrated by the Queen’s son Bertie (David Westhead). At moments such as these we see that, despite the blunt directness that has characterized his performance to this point and which has been the subject of most of the commentary on that performance, Connolly is still capable of considerable subtlety. Another scene that demonstrates this comes as he pointedly struggles with the formal language that accompanies a submission of a letter of resignation to the Queen. As Connolly’s voice cracks and his eyes well up, we are moved by his emotion as well his inability to articulate his feelings directly, much like what was seen in Victoria’s conversation with the Dean. The difference between the performances is thus not that Connolly’s lacks skill or subtlety. It is that because of his persona, he is not recognized for it in the way that Dench has been.

As indicated by some of the disparaging nicknames for films of the heritage cycle listed by Higson – “frock flicks,” “bodice rippers” and “white flannel films” – as well as the more neutral critical term “costume drama,” the films are most commonly associated with clothing, specifically the lavish and detailed costumes on display in the films. Mrs. Brown is no exception to this generalization, but the usage of costume in the film, and
indeed in many other heritage works, does not consist solely of presenting ornate costumes for viewers to admire. As several scholars have argued, costumes are best understood as not just the “eye candy” in any given film, but instead as part of the aesthetic system of a film text, contributing to the process of making meaning just as much as editing, dialogue or any other element of film style does. Pam Cook, in her case study of Britain’s Gainsborough melodramas, has linked uses of costume in period dramas to the ways in which films project images of national identity. Such an approach dovetails nicely with my current line of argument because, as she points out, tartanry, one of the regressive discourses much derided by the Scotch Reels critics, is a discourse that in visual terms is closely intertwined with dress and costume.

This is a crucial observation for my argument regarding the overlooking of Mrs. Brown within Scottish cinema studies and requires that we look more closely at the attitudes towards tartanry within the field as well as the use of the kilt within the film. McArthur picks up on the relationship between the film and the discourse of tartanry when he describes it as “one of those so-called ‘kilt films’” and places it alongside works such as Rob Roy (Michael Caton-Jones, 1995) and Braveheart (Mel Gibson, 1995) and goes on to argue that the film represents Brown as something tantamount to the “house nigger” of antebellum American fiction. While I will have something to say about this characterization later in this article, for now I will be concerned with showing how Brown’s costume is used throughout the course of the film as well as the ways in which tartanry is mobilized by the film to set Brown apart from the English characters in the film.

For many Scottish cultural critics tartanry has been described as an inauthentic and regressive pattern of representation of the national culture. Tom Nairn, for instance, in his The Break-Up of Britain laments the
“unbearable, crass, mindless philistinism” of the tartan displays seen on international nights at London pubs.\textsuperscript{24} He has also commented on the persistence of the discourse and the relationship of that persistence to a very negative view of popular culture, saying that “Tartanry will not wither away, if only because it possesses the force of its own vulgarity.”\textsuperscript{25} This line was taken up in the polemical works of the \textit{Scotch Reels} collection, and brought to bear on cinema specifically by Colin McArthur in his seminal essay “Scotland and Cinema: The Iniquity of the Fathers.”\textsuperscript{26} Though this exclusively negative view of tartanry and cinema has been challenged by Cook and Petrie (as well as others),\textsuperscript{27} the latter in the latest of his surveys of Scottish cultural production in the devolutionary period nonetheless excludes films and television programmes that features such discourses, on the grounds that they constitute “market-driven distortions” of Scotland, as opposed to the “the more productive achievements and traditions within Scottish cultural expression” he privileges in the study.\textsuperscript{28}

The use of the kilt (and the iconography of the Highlands for that matter) in \textit{Mrs. Brown}, however, invests the discourse with significant dignity and respectability and uses it, within the codes of heritage cinema, as a way of asserting Scottish national difference. Unlike their usage in “new” Scottish films like \textit{Shallow Grave} and \textit{Trainspotting}, icons of tartan Scottishness such as the kilt are handled in \textit{Mrs. Brown} without a hint of irony or subversion, instead they play a major part in the proud projection of national identity and difference. Throughout the film, Brown is consistently clad in tartan and we only see him not wearing a kilt on a handful of occasions. These include the time discussed above when he is seen nude while swimming (itself an important costume choice), and several other times when he is seen in trousers. Not all of these are significant or even noticeable, but there is one particular scene that is telling of the ways in which costume is used to distinguish Brown
from the film’s English characters. This comes late in the
film after Disraeli (Anthony Sher) has prevailed upon
Brown to take action and convince the Queen to return
to public duties and, by so doing, stem the growing
tide of Republicanism which threatens the Tory govern-
ment as well as, Brown is led to believe, the Queen’s
reign. Arguing with Victoria over whether or not he has
betrayed her by suggesting she answer parliament’s calls
to return to public duty, Brown appears indoors in
trousers instead of his customary kilt. Making a pained
plea that the audience knows he does not want to make,
Brown’s costume here suggests a newfound alliance
with the English members of the court who have through-
out the film been trying to coax the Queen into such
a return. Brown’s discomfort at having to assume such a
position is underscored by his seemingly awkward move-
ments in the trousers, an awkwardness which is amplified
by the jarring effect that his alien appearance has to an
audience which is, at this point, unaccustomed to seeing
Brown dressed in such a fashion. The growing distance
between the characters is clear when at the end of the
argument Victoria chastises Brown for referring to her as
“woman,” something that he has done throughout the
film, saying “Do not presume to speak to your Queen in
such a manner.” This answer is one of rigidly formal
language and is spoken by Dench in a tone of voice
that is regal and condescending, far from the intimate
tones that characterized the pair’s conversations up to
this point.

As a way of moving into discussing the historical
issues at stake in Mrs. Brown, it is worth pointing out the
significant alteration to history made by screenwriter
Jeremy Brock and director John Madden, one which
demonstrates the deliberateness of the usage of costume
in the film. A well-known trait of the real life Victoria
was her love for all things Scottish and tartan. Dorothy
Thompson, one of Victoria’s many biographers, describes
the extent of this fascination:
Both Victoria and Albert were enchanted with the Highlands. The establishment at Balmoral of the royal residence helped to create a craze for all things tartan and Scottish. Visitors to the royal residences, especially Balmoral, were startled by the clashing tartans displayed in the domestic furnishings. The royal children appeared in public and in photographs and portraits dressed up in Highland costume - that is, in kilts with plaids and sporrans, frilly shirts and all the nineteenth-century trimmings.29

The film’s alteration to history, making Brown the only character to appear in a kilt although members of the royal family would have been dressed in such a manner at the time, emphasises the extent to which the film-makers wanted to underscore Brown’s status as a cultural outsider.

We also do well here to remember Hugh Trevor-Roper’s seminal exposé of the history of the kilt. Here Trevor-Roper shows that despite its connotations of Highland Scottishness, the garment was invented by an Englishman and marketed to the English upper-classes during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, ultimately becoming a very popular fashion item amongst the nobility and even the royal family. As he points out, kilts as we know them were never the garment of choice for the Scottish working-classes outside of service.30 Brown’s statement in the film that he gets part of his salary for “a pile of old tartan that [he’d] be wearing anyway” is thus another one of these inaccuracies. Even if Brock and Madden were not aware of the historical literature surrounding Victoria and Scottish fashion, other film versions of her life, including Victoria the Great and Sixty Glorious Years do present the Englishmen in Victoria’s court as wearing tartan. From what we know of Victoria’s court, and about the history
of the kilt itself, the differing costumes of the Queen’s entourage and Brown are inventions of the film-makers, hoping to culturally polarize the characters at the level of costume. Such a polarization allows the film-makers another element of style with which to depict Victoria’s growing closeness to Brown, as at the height of Brown’s influence over the Queen, we see her clad in tartan at a ceilidh in Balmoral, an image which is so easy to read that it is no surprise to see that it graces the cover of the film’s DVD release.

Mrs. Brown and Devolution: Unionist Heritage
Having established how the film mobilizes both textual and intertextual generic conventions of costume drama to project cultural difference within Britain and, at points, to suggest a balance between those cultures, I will now turn to issues of history and its representation in the film. As the film takes Scotland’s role in the British national past as one of its explicit subjects, more so than any film of the so-called new Scottish cinema period, I would be remiss if I did not examine exactly how that national past is imagined and what relevance that has for the time in which it was produced, a period that is described by all as one of momentous political change for Britain and Scotland.

One of the most pervasive criticisms of the heritage cycle of the Thatcher years was that it failed to engage critically with history or to offer any substantial commentary on the present day. John Hill sums up the positions of those criticizing the political disengagement of heritage cinema with the present when he writes about the initial debates regarding heritage culture in the late 1980s: “Heritage culture is often regarded as a form of retreat from the present, providing satisfactions which the present does not provide or compensation for what it lacks.” But later commentators on the genre have taken up the position that heritage does comment on the present, if only to attack the way in which it does so.
Monk notes that because of its mapping of national identity onto the trials and tribulations of upper-class characters, heritage cinema, like heritage culture at large, was accused of “promot[ing] a false notion of historical reality.”32 This is among the complaints that Scottish film critic Colin McArthur made about Mrs. Brown in his review for Sight and Sound: that despite its projection of a complimentary sort of Scottish heritage, its claims about the relationship between Brown and Victoria “actually confirm [the Scots’] subjection.”33

An examination of the interpretation of history in Mrs. Brown does well to begin with some account of the “history” it takes as its subject. Though Victoria is of course a well known figure in British history, her relationship with Brown has remained relatively opaque to historians and obscure to the lay person. Commenting on the selection of this particular relationship for the subject of the film, and its treatment by the film-makers, McKechnie notes that “the way [the film’s] love story is foregrounded over the ‘demands’ of history and biography takes advantage of gaps in historical recording. Mrs. Brown does not take its historical responsibility lightly; but rather than merely reproducing, it interprets.”34 Indeed much of the journalistic coverage of the film, both in the UK and abroad, included some explanation of the gap in the historical accounts of Brown and Victoria’s relationship, which the film uses as its point of departure.35 Because not many viewers would have been aware of the John Brown controversy, much less of its particular details, the film-makers would not have faced the sort of pedantic nit-picking in the name of “accuracy” that usually accompanies the reception of historical biopics. More importantly, few viewers will find discrepancies troublesome enough to distract them from the film’s narrative. At the same time, however, the film can claim to make a statement on an actual historical controversy, suggesting that Victoria and Brown shared a very passionate, but in the end chaste friendship.
Embedded in this interpretation of the life of a British monarch is a foregrounding of the role that a Scottish servant played at a moment of great historical importance, heroically forgoing his own wishes, sacrificing his closest friendship and by doing so, saving the monarchy. Even if Brown is only provoked into doing so by the unscrupulous Disraeli, and even if Disraeli acts only out of self-interest, the film nonetheless presents the preservation of the monarchy as a good thing. This is underscored by the sweeping parliamentary address by Disraeli which follows the Queen’s decree that Brown will be given an award for devoted service. As Victoria solemnly reflects on Brown’s service and Brown himself is seen stoically accepting his fate to be relegated to the shadows, the film moves to Disraeli’s swelling oration praising the decision to keep the monarchy intact, ending on the words “power and glory” while Parliament erupts in applause.

Brown’s noble action of self-denial and loyalty takes on a particular importance when one considers the film’s own historical context, as the political concerns of the United Kingdom in 1997 are writ large in the text of *Mrs. Brown*, specifically the movement of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, towards political devolution, which culminated in a second referendum in the year of the film’s release. Knowing such a movement was in the air, Victoria’s angry reaction when she learns of the ecclesiastical “devolution” of Ireland – “The Irish must be told very firmly to stay exactly where they are. It’s the thin end of the wedge Mr. Disraeli. The next thing you will be telling me is that I no longer rule this nation” – takes on a special resonance, especially as the nation being referred to is Scotland, as she is at Balmoral when she says this.

Simply choosing to make a film about Queen Victoria at this time could be seen as a significant statement in light of the ongoing devolutionary movement. It was Victoria after all who presided over the
unprecedented expansion of the Empire abroad and who attempted to use her influence to create a truly “united kingdom.” These efforts included the purchase of estates in Scotland and the Isle of Wight, the designation of the future king as the Prince of Wales, the granting of her children symbolic dukedoms throughout Great Britain (e.g. the Dukes of Cornwall and Edinburgh), and starting a popular craze for all things tartan and Highland. For all of this, Victoria was a sovereign who, more than most others, is associated with trying to spread the monarchy throughout the kingdom. An invocation of her legacy at such a point in history thus recalls a united Great Britain at a moment which some would consider the precipice of its irrevocable break-up. This invocation is especially resonant when the film’s narrative presents a pan-British historical allegory which positions Scotsman Brown as the force that gets Victoria back to her public duties and in effect saves the monarchy from the threat of Republicanism. This context was not completely lost among the film’s journalistic reviewers. Alexander Walker (1997), for one, noted in *The Evening Standard*, that, despite impending devolution “here you have the future of the British crown dependent on a Scotsman.”

Though the film presents Brown and the Queen as forgoing their private desires for the public good, there is still some ambivalence about the treatment of Brown at the hands of the British establishment. The view that the film projects of Brown as noble in his self-sacrifice can also be seen as supporting a postcolonial reading of his role in Victoria’s life and reign. In order to develop this reading we can begin by returning to McArthur’s comments on the film which compare Brown to the “house nigger” of slavery stories and in which McArthur argues that the film is an “ideological con trick” and says that Brown’s apparent high standing in Victoria’s court serves to mask a “discourse that confirms [the Scots’] subjection.” There is much in the film to support McArthur’s view of the film. The physical vigour of
Brown, represented by the numerous shots of his naked or bruised body, can be seen as the by-now recognizable erotic subject of the colonizer’s (i.e. the Queen’s) gaze. In this respect, Neely is correct to make a parallel between the film and those of the so-called Raj revival of the 1980s, in which imperial history was represented sexually through various permutations of colonizer and colonized. Even the word “noble,” which I have used in describing Brown, is all too easily linked with “savage.” Such a view of the film would interpret Brown’s sacrifice as one procured through the Machiavellian trickery of Disraeli and subsequently historically suppressed through the intervention of the equally Machiavellian members of court.

Any critical reading of the film along these lines is problematized, however, by the melodramatic pull of Brown’s deathbed scene. When Victoria comes to see Brown on his deathbed she offers what the film presents as a heartfelt apology for her neglect of Brown in the intervening years since the stay at Balmoral and says that she is desperate at the thought of losing him. The tenderness with which this scene is filmed and acted, with rising music, soft candlelight, and Dench’s teary eyes, presents the apology as genuine. Though it cannot be said to cancel out all of the colonially charged images we have seen to this point, the deathbed apology does illustrate the fact that the film wants to show Brown’s devotion to the Queen as something that was recognized and appreciated – not simply disregarded by a capricious, egocentric ruler – and finally as justified and rewarded, despite the final act of betrayal by Ponsonby that keeps the truth about Brown and the Queen from ever being known.

Brown really was Victoria’s best friend, as he somewhat pitifully argued to Archie, and his sacrifice was appreciated. The nationalist allegory that underpins the film is thus one of nobility, not subjection, one made from a point-of-view we can roughly call Unionist. Whether or not this is a regressive ideological position will depend on
each viewer’s stance on the question of Scottish nationalism, but what is significant for our purposes is that the film does make a statement on Scottish identity, even if – as is suggested by McArthur’s reading of the film – the Unionist bent of that statement can be said to have influenced its position in Scottish film history.

Conclusion: Writing *Mrs. Brown* Back into Scottish Film History

That *Mrs. Brown* simply attempts to engage with issues of Scottish identity during the devolutionary period is, in and of itself, of great historical significance. Within the body of work now known as the “new Scottish cinema” (i.e. Scottish cinema since approximately the time of the first devolutionary referendum in 1979), this is the only film to deal directly with devolutionary themes. Though David Martin-Jones has argued that films such as *Orphans* (Peter Mullan, 1999), *Regeneration* (Gillies MacKinnon, 1998), *The Last Great Wilderness* (David Mackenzie, 2002) and *Dog Soldiers* (Neil Marshall, 2002) symptomatically reflect English and Scottish national anxieties regarding devolution,40 *Mrs. Brown* goes much further, in effect presenting an allegorical apology to Scotland for any neglect on the part of the Crown. As the achievements of Scottish cinema in the devolutionary period are usually aligned with the movement of the nation away from the United Kingdom – Petrie’s original narrative of what he calls “new Scottish cinema” culminates with the cinematic achievements of *Ratcatcher* and *Orphans* coinciding with the establishment of the devolved Scottish Parliament,41 suggesting a link between the two – *Mrs. Brown* deserves more in-depth attention than it has heretofore received for dealing so overtly with the issue. This relative lack of attention may be explained by the anti-devolutionary stance that the film takes. After all, in the context of a movement that has been described as one towards national political and representational sovereignty, a film that can be perceived to be celebrating
Unionism and, with its unashamed tartanry, revels in what most Scottish cinema critics would call “incorrect” Scottishness, is somewhat troublesome from a historian’s point-of-view. This is especially the case given the film’s generic context, as Petrie’s seminal history of Scottish cinema explicitly opposes the “new Scottish cinema” of *Shallow Grave* (Danny Boyle, 1994) and *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) to “British cinema’s over-reliance on tasteful period films.”

What I have hoped to show in this article is that *Mrs. Brown* mobilizes generic conventions to make a clear statement of Scottish difference from Englishness and then in turn utilizes that difference to craft an allegory that celebrates the nation’s role in upholding a united British state. Such sophisticated usage of genre, combined with a clear commentary on issues of national and international importance, combined with the film’s box office success in the UK and abroad and its almost unprecedented critical acclaim for a Scottish feature (it was the second Scottish feature after *Trainspotting* to be nominated for an Academy Award) means that the film merits a position within the canon of important Scottish films. The failure of Scottish cinema historiography, however, to find a place for a film as significant as *Mrs. Brown* speaks to the limitations of the explicitly nationalist stance that the field has been shaped by. Organizing accounts of Scottish cinema in the devolutionary period around films that break from Britain at the level of theme and genre distorts the nature of the period, as seen by the omission of *Mrs. Brown* and the maligning of other important, high profile films such as *Local Hero* (Bill Forsyth, 1983), which has been excluded for its presumed employment of regressive “kailyardic” discourses, but which also satirizes those discourses and makes in its own comic statements on the exploitation of Scotland at the hands of the British. A fuller and more holistic account of the period will not attempt to homogenize the period in terms of thematic pro-devolutionary statements...
but will instead include films that take other views on the subject. Histories that take this approach can only give us a clearer view of all the conflict, complexity and contradiction that marks the devolutionary period as seen in the cinema as well as every other facet of Scottish culture and history.
Notes

1 Like many contemporary Scottish films, *Mrs. Brown* is a multinational co-production with finance coming from the UK, Ireland and the USA. However, the film was commissioned by BBC Scotland by then head of drama Andrea Calderwood and was produced in large part by Ecosse Films, a London-based production company run by Scots producer Douglas Rae. I therefore consider it to be an indigenous Scottish production even though there are a number of transnational facets to the film’s production and distribution. These issues are explored in greater detail in my “Underwriting Cultural Sovereignty?: Policy, the Market and Scottish National Cinema: 1982-Present” (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Warwick, 2007).


15 The film was originally commissioned by BBC Scotland as a television drama, but, emboldened by positive test screenings, executive producer Andrea Calderwood struck a deal with distributor Miramax to release the film theatrically.

16 Caughie, *Television Drama*, 224.


18 Petrie, *Screening Scotland*, 212.

19 McKechnie, “Taking Liberties with the Monarch,” 229.


22 Cook, *Fashioning the Nation*, 29


29 Dorothy Thompson, *Queen Victoria: Gender and Power* (London: Virago. 2001), 54.


34 McKechnie, “Mrs. Brown’s Mourning and Mr. King’s Madness,” 228.


42 Petrie, *Screening Scotland*, 1.