
The question of how museums present episodes from the past for a viewing public has occupied scholarly minds since museums first developed beyond mere ‘cabinets of curiosity’ in the nineteenth century. Displaying emotive events such as the Highland Clearances, which are not tied to any specific tangible artefacts, is even tougher ground to negotiate. In her new book, Laurence Gourievidis examines some of the ways that the memory and facts of the Clearances are, and have been, presented in fifteen Scottish museums. By visiting the sites and questioning staff about their display choices, Gourievidis creates an interdisciplinary study of the process of memorialisation and the role of museums in shaping views of the Clearances.

To set up her study of current museum practice, Gourievidis first introduces the reader to the ways in which narratives of the Clearances have been used in history, fiction, and other cultural discourses. She also engages with historiographical debates around the Clearances, and the ways in which history writing has been used for political means. Once this has been established, she moves on to exploring the power behind the formation of Clearances-focused museum and heritage sites. The point made here—that it is and has been predominantly small, local, and volunteer-led museums that highlight the Clearances—might seem basic, but is in fact very important to understanding the motivations behind narrative formation.

It is after this background is fully explored that the heart of the study emerges. In chapter four, Gourievidis
establishes a useful typology of Clearance narratives, analysing the ways in which national and local museums can negotiate the various pressures and expectations put on them by audiences and funders in order to present varying aspects of the Clearances. She then moves into looking at curatorial agency, examining to what extent interpretation is influenced by historiography or museological practice, and whether narratives are presented as reflexive and contested or static.

In the last third of the book Gourievidis brings all of this together in order to connect specific narrative choices made by individual museums to larger contextual issues embedded within politics, economics, and the heritage world. It is here that she fully engages with whether the Clearance narratives she has identified have changed over time in response to museum philosophy or economic and political developments. Gourievidis is able to pointedly question whether changes in narrative practice have shaped Clearance displays, whether the economic rationale cited by local groups in founding museums for community regeneration have any influence, and whether political expectations of the Highlands alter exhibition storylines.

Throughout her study, Gourievidis makes clear what has too long been a tacit understanding in museum studies—namely that there are distinct differences in the types of narratives that are presented in national, local and independent museums, and that these differences have to do not only, as is usually suspected, with funding but with the extent to which narratives are shaped by the situations and goals of the institution. National museums are generally seen as the most important type, because they have the power of the state behind them, but as Gourievidis and her survey respondents make clear, smaller museums are often able to better engage with specific and contentious issues such as the Clearances.

Thanks to the breakdown of the types of Clearance narratives (graphic p. 63), the reader can begin to think
critically about why narrative choices are made as they are. Some of these seem fairly self-evident, like that clan-based institutions tend to focus on emigratory stories of their clan’s diasporic population, but others take more teasing out, such as the choices made at the National Museum of Scotland. In this more complicated case it would have been helpful to have some deeper analysis of what Gourievidis highlights as failings in the narrative—that the Clearance narrative in the national museum is largely emigratory rather than national. While identifying this choice is useful, further examination of what this means for the presence of the Highland Clearances in the ‘common unconscious’ that national museums create would have given a deeper sense of the place of Clearance narratives in modern Scotland.

I believe it is in the last few chapters that Gourievidis’ study is at its most innovative and valuable. Her detailed examination of the economics (chapter seven) and politics (chapter eight) of museum narratives, particularly the smaller local and independent institutions not only provides important comparative information on presentations of one topic (the Clearances) in one country, but it also encourages consideration of how these factors influence museum narratives regardless of topic or location. Modern museums are increasingly an economic and political boon for their communities, and it makes sense that narrative choices might reflect this, but their impact has largely been understated.

*The Dynamics of Heritage* does a number of useful things for the researcher of Scottish historiography or museology. It provides a sense of the development of Clearance narratives over time, it outlines how historiography is, or is not transferred to the heritage sector, and, thanks to its large-scale comparison of Scottish museums, it encourages critical examination of the forces behind museum narratives. In the conclusion Gourievidis begins a tantalisingly brief analysis of Clearance narratives outwith Scotland, particularly in Australia. This glimpse of further work just shows how much
additional scholarship could be built on the framework that Gourievidis has begun.

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