SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL MONUMENT, 1816-1828

o one can move east along Edinburgh's Princes Street without catching sight of Scotland's National Monument on Calton Hill. Its silhouette crowns the vista; romantic ruin it may seem, uncompleted building it actually is, but the classical facade that is all that exists imposes itself on the city with picturesque effect, immediately evocative of Edinburgh as the 'Athens of the North'. Contrariwise, the least impression it has made has been on historians. Perhaps this can be regarded as another case of professional myopia, of the way history tends to be written around successes and the successful. Certainly, little or no significance has been attached to the National Monument. Often quoted is the sardonic comment of the resident architect about the time building ground to a halt in 1828, that such an outcome proved the 'pride and poverty of us Scots'. Henry Cockburn is remembered, too, for dismissing it as something dreamt up immediately after Waterloo out of 'the prevailing effervescence of military patriotism'.¹

Yet there is more here than meets the eye. Cockburn was a leading whig, the National Monument coincided with a period of intensifying party politics in Scotland and Cockburn was cocking a snook at what he perceived

to be tory militarism. The story becomes even more interesting because Cockburn, along with Francis Jeffrey, the editor of the whig *Edinburgh Review*, can be said to have captured the project from the tories when they joined the committee of subscribers in 1821 and succeeded in replacing the design (and the architect) favoured by the tories with one of their own. At one level, it is true, the conflict was over architectural style, or even patronage. C.R. Cockerell, the architect eventually chosen, was at this stage of his career a leading exponent of classical Greek models and the superiority of 'Greek' was strongly argued at the time in the Edinburgh press.

The decision to build a replica of the Parthenon on Calton Hill did, then, represent current fashion; but what has passed unnoticed is that the Monument in this form became a riposte to the Roman, and therefore more militaristic, preferences of the tories. At the deepest level the Monument project developed into a competition between two different national identities for Scotland: the tories wished to emphasise Scotland's martial achievements which drew them towards Highlandism and a version of Scottish history making much of the ancientness and long independence of the Scottish kingdom: the whigs, in contrast, placed more importance on civil achievement, especially the country's progress since the Union.

The immediate setting of the Monument project was the triumphant end of the war with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. Scotland had played a conspicuous

part in the struggle particularly through the deeds of the 'national' regiments. But equally in the mind of the Monument's promoters was the fact that, for the first time since the Union, Scots had played a full part in their own defence as militia and volunteers. A proposal early taken up by the committee was for the deposit of muster rolls of all volunteer and yeomanry corps and local militia in recognition of this 'armed nation'.²

There was, however, more to the Monument than commemoration or even nation-making. If the wars had seen Britain prevail against the greatest enemy she had ever encountered and had carried Britain's power and reputation in the world to new heights, it was because a massive mobilisation of home resources, especially manpower, had secured what would otherwise have been a highly vulnerable national base while expanding British armed power abroad.

The much extended empire and European leadership Britain now possessed depended, ultimately, on the army and navy backed by a society organised for its own defence. Tories, at least, took these matters seriously. They had conducted the war and had created the armed nation; they believed that in a new age of mass warfare and empire Britain less than ever could afford to exist only as a 'commercial society'. The encouragement of military service and 'military spirit' thus amounted to policy. Scottish tories were willing to see their country as peculiarly useful to the state with its Highlands-derived warrior tradition. They also held strongly to the view that military patriotism during the

wars had killed off the radicalism of the 1790s and that it would continue to be a powerful prophylactic against popular disorder.³

That the National Monument originated as a tory initiative cannot be doubted. It was Lord Arniston, the Lord Chief Baron, himself a Dundas and second-in-command of the Dundas interest, who put the proposal to the Highland Society in January 1816.⁴ He was responding to the government's intention to seek a parliamentary grant for a 'Waterloo Monument' in London, wanting something similar in Scotland's capital. As it happened, Lord Liverpool's administration, under constant pressure to cut back expenditure and reduce taxation, eventually preferred to allocate public money to church-building. Yet at this later date the tory officeholders behind the project continued to hope for some public funding by including a church in the Monument complete with clerical endowment.

A public meeting in February 1819 heard these plans and embarked on a subscription. The Duke of Atholl was in the chair and the business was introduced by the Lord Justice Clerk and Sir William Rae, soon to be Lord Advocate. From then on tory influence was mobilised in all directions. The General Assembly, on a motion seconded by the Lord Justice Clerk, approved an appeal to parishes, magnates in London were rallied and Indian and colonial governments written to. The Lord Advocate and Michael Linning, a tory lawyer who acted as secretary to the bitter end, organised the committee work.⁵

In 1816 the Highland Society had contemplated the erection of a 'pillar' or 'triumphal arch' in obvious imitation of Roman victory monuments.⁶

Three years later Archibald Elliott was commissioned to produce drawings and came up with a building 'modelled on the Pantheon of Rome, with a church attached', the latter because a government grant was still in contention. Inside the Monument itself were to be inscribed the names and deeds of Scots who had distinguished themselves in the wars, together with the services of the Scottish regiments. As already mentioned, the rolls of the home corps were to be deposited as a permanent record. There also seems to have been the idea of displaying war trophies, Sir John Sinclair in 1820 donating Waterloo memorabilia.⁷ The point about all this is that in tory hands the Monument was entirely conceived as a war monument, inspiring military patriotism (of course, out of commemoration). Linning described it as:

calculated to promote the interests of religion - to uphold the altar and the throne - to cherish the best affections of the people - and to render a just and pious tribute ... [Scotsmen] ought to be gratified with the contemplation of some striking memorial of their country's prowess and glory; something calculated to console the feelings of those to whom our departed warriors were near and dear - to kindle the admiration, and to stimulate the exertions of future heroes.⁸

Yet in a short while the Monument was being touted as the 'Westminster Abbey of the North ... recording the glories, *in every walk of genius, of all our countrymen*' [my italics]:

Where are the monuments that commemorate the services of Duncan, of Abercromby, of Moore? Where those which tell us of the discoveries of Napier, or Gregory, or Maclaurin, or that are to record the celebrity of our lamented contemporary Playfair? And why is the memory of such writers as Smith, Robertson, Ferguson, or of such poets as Thomson, Home, and Burns ... entirely neglected in a land where nationality is so deeply cherished? ⁹

At the same time the Roman Pantheon had given way to the Athenian Parthenon which was to be erected on Calton Hill, a site, it was said, superior to the Acropolis itself. Less was made of the Parthenon as a victory monument than that it represented the best in architecture and that in Edinburgh it would, overlooking the splendours of the New Town, complete the city's transition from provincial outpost to 'northern metropolis of science and art.'¹⁰ What is evident here is the mainstream view of Scottish history held by contemporaries and recently expounded by Colin Kidd.¹¹ This wrote off pre-Union Scotland as economically backward, religiously fanatical, and altogether 'feudal' in its

factionalism, violence and ignorance. The eighteenth century, in contrast, had seen commerce expand, the rule of law properly established, learning flourish and religious contentions subdued. Scots had been brought to a sense of national achievement and therefore national identity, even if it had Anglo-British rather than Celtic sources. Put in such a context, the Parthenon placed in Edinburgh would be totally appropriate. It would stand as a pre-eminent symbol of 'civilised' Scotland: 'If London boasts of St Paul's - Paris of the colonnade of the Louvre - and Rome of St Peter's - were the Caledonian capital to possess the Parthenon restored ... well might she raise her head among these proud cities, and, in one respect at least, surpass the glories of even the Eternal City itself.'¹²

Tory ideas and plans, then, stood athwart powerful intellectual and artistic currents. But the Tories were defeated only because their Whig opponents expertly mobilised opinion against them. Indeed, the decision in favour of the Parthenon was among the first signs of Whig revival in Scotland after the long Dundas ascendancy. The attack on the Lord Advocate and Elliott's 'church' began in the Edinburgh press and ran for over a year before a crucial meeting of subscribers in June 1821. Party politics intruded the more easily into the issue because the debate coincided with all the partisanship excited by Peterloo and Queen Caroline's trial. At the meeting Jeffrey and Cockburn proposed the Parthenon and prevailed, and followed up this success by having Whigs well-represented on a new committee

of management. In the subscription book, which survives, the note 'on condition that the Parthenon be restored' was recorded against about 40 names, almost all of them Edinburgh professional men.¹³ Clearly, these were the troops that Jeffrey and Cockburn marshalled. But the whigs also won because they appealed to an educated elite on grounds of 'art' and further beautification of Scotland's capital, their case much strengthened by the availability of a magnificent site. Their tory adversaries, on the other hand, placed too much emphasis on the need for the monument to include a church which immediately raised questions about where it should go and whether the bulk of Scots would be interested in providing Edinburgh with yet another place of worship. The tories lost the argument which it is important to win on these occasions - the argument for local pride and dignity.

Of course, in one sense nobody won. Though the foundation stone was laid at the time of George IV's visit in 1822 and though architects were appointed the following year, building, begun in 1826, ceased when money ran out towards the end of 1828. The subscriptions collected amounted to well under half the projected cost.¹⁴ The history of the Monument is most interesting for the several chapters it contains: the beginning of the end of the tory ascendancy in Scotland, the far from straightforward process after the Union of 'inventing' a Scottish identity, the 'revival of Greek' in architecture and Edinburgh city-making (the last two not dealt with in this short article). While the Monument ended up a

tory defeat, Scots in the longer term were not loathe to define themselves in ways which its tory champions would have approved. Highlandism, the identification of Scotland with the Highlands, owed much to military Scotland in the early nineteenth century. The famous regiments, tartanry and Highland games, which were key ingredients, were directly related to the tory warfare state of the period and therefore not inseparable from the origins of the National Monument itself.¹⁵

J. E. Cookson
University of Canterbury
New Zealand

Endnotes

1. Playfair to C. R. Cockerell, 30 June 1829, National Library of Scotland [NLS], Cockerell MSS, MS 638, ff. 133-4; H. Cockburn, Memorials of His Time, K. F. C. Miller (ed.), (Chicago, 1974), 291.
2. NLS, Minto MSS, Committee on the National Monument of Scotland, printed circular letter, 8 Sep. 1819, MS 11747, ff. 113-15.
3. See J. E. Cookson, The British Armed Nation 1793-1815 (Oxford, 1997).
4. Prize Essays and Transactions of the Highland Society of Scotland, vol. 4 (Edinburgh, 1820), p. lxi.
5. Edinburgh City Archives [ECA], National Monument [NM] MS minutes, pp. 10-40.

Scottish Tradition Vol. 24 1999

6. Scottish Record Office [SRO], RH4/188, Highland Society of Scotland, sederunt book, vol. 5 (1814-18), pp. 199-200. William Gillespie, the architect, produced drawings for an arch. See Edinburgh Evening Courant [EEC], 25 June 1821.
7. Ibid., 23 Apr. 1818, 9 Mar., 24 July 1819, 3 Jan. 1820. An engraving of Elliot's Monument was included with a circular of 8 Sep. 1819. See NLS, Minto MSS, MS 11747, f.115.
8. EEC, 9 Mar. 1819.
9. NLS, Airth MSS, circular from the Committee, 25 Dec. 1821, MS 10958, ff. 304-5; 'Restoration of the Parthenon', Edinburgh Magazine, 6 (1820), 104, 312.
10. Ibid., 6 (1820), 99-105, 304-12; 9 (1821), 49-52; Edinburgh Review, 38 (1823), 126-44.
11. C. Kidd, Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity 1689-c.1830 (Cambridge, 1993).
12. Edinburgh Magazine, 9 (1821), 52.
13. ECA, NM minutes, 18 June 1821; EEC, 21 June 1821. The subscription book is in the ECA.
14. ECA, NM minutes, 8 Dec. 1823.
15. Cookson, 'The Napoleonic Wars, Military Scotland and Tory Highlandism in the Early Nineteenth Century'.