

Scotland and Colonialism: *Scotland – a colonising state or a colony of England?*

There is a common perception that Scotland was a colonising state and partner in the expansion of the English / British Empire during the 18th and 19th centuries. This is false and a misconception, as this short paper by Liberation Scotland demonstrates.

Introduction

Prior to its forced incorporation into the Anglo-British state in 1707, the independent nation of Scotland had no record of military colonial territorial expansion beyond its own territory.

Before its annexation by England, Scotland had existed as a unified, independent nation for more than eight centuries and, throughout the middle ages and up to the late 17th century, had established a thriving network of international trading relationships with cities and states across mainland Europe. Scottish ‘trading colonies’, indeed, provided the model for the modern trade embassy and became the foundation of Scotland’s amicable international relationships, something which continues to this day in the international welcome extended to Scots abroad.

From 1707 to the present day, Scotland exhibits all of the traits of a colony (or non-self governing territory as defined by the UN), where the indigenous elite were effectively assimilated into the administration of the coloniser and where the vast majority of the population of the colony was exploited by the coloniser in numerous ways. Thus, from the 18th century onwards, the colonial structures of the ‘British’ Empire included many individual Scots who participated in militarily and economically in growing, administering and profiting from the very empire that was also engaged in actively colonising their own country.

It is acknowledged that individual Scots, (as distinct from the nation of Scotland), participated in the colonial activities of and exploitation by the ‘British Empire’ (a continuation of the English empire originally established in the late 16th and early 17th centuries by England alone) and also that members of the Scots elite benefitted from the wealth flowing from that colonial empire, through their participation.

However it was not possible for the nation of Scotland itself to be a colonising state, since following its annexation by England in 1707, it ceased to exist as an independent nation state.

Further, that individual Scots participated in the colonising activities of the ‘British’ Empire is unsurprising. One of the shared features of colonised societies (whether Scotland, India, Nigeria, Kenya, Ireland, north American etc.) is the adverse psychological impact on the indigenous population, which combined with material deprivation, economic marginalisation and social degradation, leads to the participation by the colonised peoples in their coloniser’s project.

Pre-1707 – Scotland as an independent trading nation.

Prior to 1707, Scotland's east coast burghs had a long-established and thriving network of international trading relationships with mainland Europe throughout the middle ages and up to the late 17th century, primarily with neighbouring countries including the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Scandinaviaⁱ and the Hanseatic Leagueⁱⁱ and Baltic Sea portsⁱⁱⁱ, with the primary exports being wool, hides, salt and (later) coal. Scotland's trade was adversely impacted by the introduction of the Navigation Acts^{iv} by England from 1660, which included an embargo on activity by all foreign (including Scottish) ships.

As an independent nation, Scotland's international trading model was based on the established trading mechanisms of the era, via a network of mutually beneficial trading routes located across the North Sea and Baltic Sea regions. This trade became so important that Scottish trading posts were established in many European ports and their hinterland. These Scots settlements were small, limited and not intended for colonial expansion purposes, but for the facilitation of commercial trade for the mutual benefit of Scotland and its trading partners. Scotland's trading settlements were naturalised and welcomed across Europe and beyond. An important feature of these Scottish settlements abroad was the absence of any military presence or territorial expansion activity.

This was equally true of the small temporary Scottish trading settlements established across the Atlantic in the late 17th century, i.e. in Nova Scotia (Canada)^v between 1629-1632, and in Darien^{vi} (Panama) between 1698-1700. In both cases, these Scottish settlements were small, localised in territorial extent and primarily trade-based. The Scots settlers actively sought cooperation with the indigenous people, did not attempt to impose their legal or social systems on them, and respected indigenous autonomy.

Therefore, it is a matter of historical record that Scotland, as an independent nation prior to its annexation by England in 1707, has no record of military colonial territorial expansion outside of Scotland.

Post-1707 – Scotland as a colony

After forced incorporation into the United Kingdom of Great Britain in 1707, Scotland was annexed by England and lost its 800 year^{vii} status as an independent nation state, effectively becoming a non-self-governing territory (NSGT) and colony of the new administering Anglo-British state. Political and economic power was centralised in London and Scotland was left politically powerless. During the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, the majority (non land-owning) population of Scotland increasingly suffered from the adverse effects of colonisation by the Anglo-British state, including:

- Loss of its historic international trading partners in the North Sea / Baltic Sea region.
- Forced clearance of entire communities across rural Scotland (in both the 'Highlands' and 'Lowlands')^{viii} during the 18th and 19th centuries by the landowning elite to make way for livestock grazing and other more profitable land uses.

- Implementation of land use policies and ownership structures that were fundamentally colonial in nature, accompanied by the violent suppression and destruction of the historic societal system of small subsistence farmers and crofters across rural Scotland and the ancient Highland clan system and culture, through the prohibition of dress and language.
- Military occupation by British army troops and establishment of a network of several hundred military garrisons across Scotland by the mid-18th century. Refer Figure 1.
- Limited access to their land and sea resources by the native population; resulting in recurring food scarcities throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, including the ‘highland potato famine’ in 1846-47^{ix}, in which tens of thousands starved to death.
- Resulting mass emigration from Scotland between the late 18th and early 20th centuries (primarily to Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand) - assisted and supported by the British government and institutions; this resulted in a total population loss to Scotland in excess of 2.5 million^x (compared with a total population of circa 4.5 million in 1901^{xi}).

As a direct result of colonisation, many individual Scots were deprived of opportunities for securing a livelihood for themselves and their families within their own country, and either emigrated overseas or took up positions (economic, military, administrative etc.) in the colonial activities (including the slave trade) of the British Empire.

Colonisation is always a co-operative venture between the colonising power and native elites. As with all colonised peoples, Scotland had and still has its share of native elites who profit from and aspire to the privileges offered by the administering Power in return for their complicity in the administrative control of the territory. So far from identifying Scotland as a coloniser, this feature of Scottish political and social history sets Scotland, firmly, alongside the many British colonies from Ireland to India, held and administered militarily and politically by their own colonised elites.

Scotland - Ireland Comparison

In order to highlight the apparent contradiction between Scotland as a colony and individual Scots as colonisers, it is instructive to compare the experiences of Ireland and Scotland by reference to their relationships with England at various stages of those Anglo-Irish and Anglo-Scottish relationships.

The country of Ireland is universally regarded as a historical colony of England dating from the late 12th Century, that was later forcibly incorporated into the so called “United Kingdom of Great Britain” in 1801, following a failed rebellion. Ireland ultimately partly decolonised itself militarily and politically during the first half of the 20th Century, although the island remains partitioned.

The key stages of the Irish and Scottish experiences of colonisation by England over several centuries are illustrated in the table below. Ireland’s history of colonisation and subsequent decolonisation is widely accepted by the international community (including the wide participation of individual Irish men and women in the British Empire as administrators, settlers and soldiers). However, despite the striking similarities with Ireland’s experience of colonisation by the English, Scotland’s true status as a colony and its right to decolonisation remain largely unrecognised to date.

Colonisation Stage	Ireland	Scotland
Stage 1: Client State / De Facto Colony	Under English control for eight centuries, Ireland had its own parliament from the 14th century until 1800 (although it was subject to English veto).	From 1603, the two independent nations of Scotland and England shared a monarch. However Scotland was restricted by England's greater political and military power from continuing to act as an independent nation.
Stage 2: Forced to Join the Union	In 1801 Ireland was forcibly incorporated into the Union amidst dissent in the Irish parliament where vote buying and other illegal practices were used to ensure a positive outcome. The Dublin Parliament voted for the Union and was closed. Ireland sent 100 MPs to the Westminster parliament.	Scotland was annexed under the 1707 Treaty of Union under economic and military duress, and against the wishes of the majority of the Scottish people. Amidst protests from ordinary Scots, the Edinburgh parliament voted for the Union and was closed. Scotland sent 45 MPs to the Westminster parliament.
Stage 3: Colonial Exploitation	Theft of Land – abolition of the indigenous clan system Famine with 2 million deaths Forced Emigration Military occupation and British army garrisons Violent oppression of the native people Resource theft – meat & grain during 19 th century famine.	Theft of Land – abolition of the indigenous clan system. Famine with tens of thousands of deaths Forced Emigration Military occupation and British army garrisons. Violent oppression of the native people Resource Theft – oil & gas, renewable energy during the 20 th century.
Stage 4: Cheated out of Self-Government	Home rule in Ireland was eventually enabled by the Government of Ireland act in 1914 but the British asserted that it could not be enacted unless military conscription was introduced in Ireland during World War 1. After the violent suppression of the 1916 Dublin uprising by the British army and the execution of its leaders, Sinn Féin won the majority of seats in the 1918 general election but refused to send its new MPs to sit in the London parliament and instead formed a new parliament in Dublin (Dail Eireann), and attempted to establish an independent Irish state.	In 1999 the devolved Scottish Parliament (established with limited powers) was opened in Edinburgh. The pro-independence Scottish National Party has lead the devolved administration since 2007 and held a referendum on Scottish independence in 2014. This used an open voting franchise that included temporary residents, second home owners and recent arrivals. The coverage by a UK media was visibly biased in favour of a 'No' vote. Inducements were offered by UK politicians late in the campaign to vote "No". This resulted in a failure to win a majority of voters for independence. In 2022, the UK Supreme Court ruled that the Scottish government cannot hold further independence referenda without the UK government's consent.
Stage 5: Decolonisation	The Anglo-Irish war of independence (1919-21) ended in the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922 with partition of the island resulting in six counties in the north of Ireland remaining part of the UK. The Irish Free State initially had the home rule status of a Dominion within the British Empire, and was not 100% sovereign until it declared an independent Irish republic in 1948. Ireland remans partly colonized today	Continued unilateral denial of right to self-determination by Westminster despite increasing majority support in polls for independence. Petition by Liberation Scotland in March 2025 for recognition of Scotland as a non self-governing territory by the UN, requiring all nations to assist in its decolonisation. Public announcement by senior legal counsel Prof. Robert Black KC, that the 1707 Treaty of Union was never enacted by England. Scotland remains colonized today.

Figure 1: British Army Garrisons across Scotland, 1746.

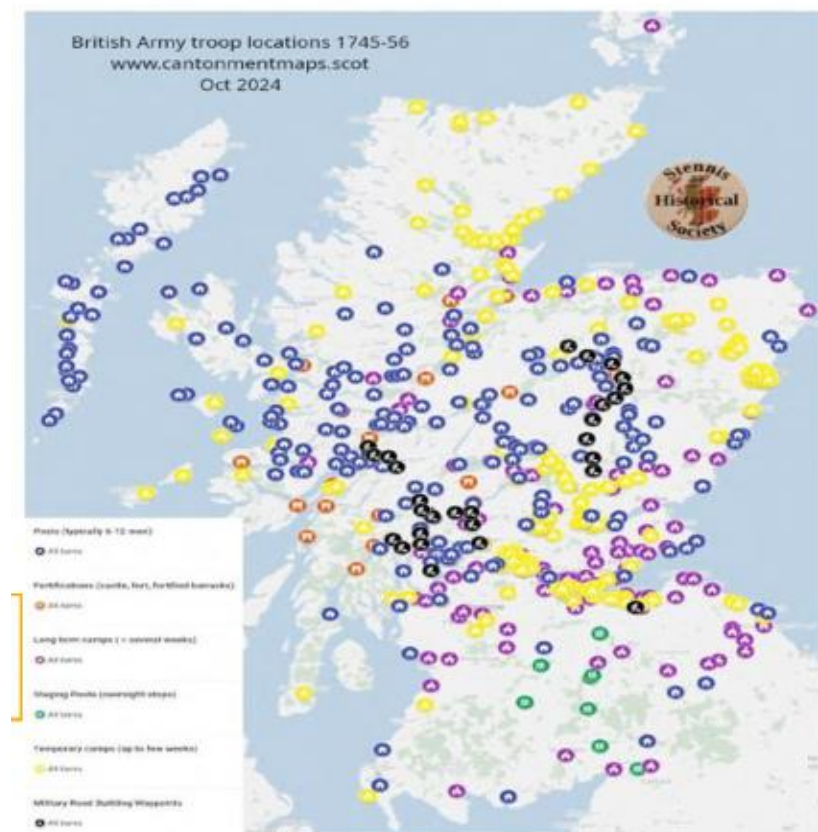


Fig. 1. Cantonment types and locations

Source: Stennis Historical Society

END NOTES:

- i B. Webster, *Medieval Scotland: the Making of an Identity* (St. Martin's Press, 1997), [ISBN 0333567617](#), pp. 122–3.
- ii <https://www.hanse.org/en/the-medieval-hanseatic-league>
- iii J. Wubs-Mrozeqicz, "'Alle goede coepluyden...': strategies in the Scandinavian trade policies of Amsterdam and Lübeck, c. 1440–1560", in Hanno Brand, Leos Müller, eds, *The Dynamics of Economic Culture in the North Sea and Baltic Region: In the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period* (Uitgeverij Verloren, 2007), [ISBN 9065508821](#), p. 88.
- iv <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/statutes-realm/vol5/pp246-250>
- v Moore, Peter (April 2020). "Scotland's Lost Colony Found: Rediscovering Stuarts Town, 1682–1688". *Scottish Historical Review*. **99** (1): 26–50. [doi:10.3366/shr.2020.0433](#). [S2CID 216481047](#) – via Edinburgh University Press.
- vi *Darien: The Scottish Dream*.
- vii [Mackenzie, Agnes M. \(1957\). The Foundations of Scotland. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd. ISBN 9781406706505.](#)
- viii <https://scottishhistorysociety.com/the-highland-clearances/>
- ix <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2591159>
- x R. A. Houston and W. W. Knox, eds, *The New Penguin History of Scotland* (London: Penguin, 2001), [ISBN 0-14-026367-5](#), p. xxxii.
- xi [General Register Office for Scotland Birth and Mortality statistics from 1900](#)