

Why have the Scots forgotten about Churchill?

While most communities are proud of their connections to significant historical figures, Scots today do not seem overly eager to claim Sir Winston Churchill. **Alastair Stewart** explores the many reasons why this might be

It does not take much digging to see that Churchill's Scottish connections are plethoric. His wife Clementine was of Scottish descent, a granddaughter of the 10th earl of Airlie. He made frequent trips to Balmoral to attend upon the sovereign; served as rector of the universities of Aberdeen in 1914-18 and Edinburgh in 1929-32; formed the Commandos from Scotland in 1940 and ordered the creation of the Scapa Flow bridges that same year.

Churchill's son Randolph even (unsuccessfully) contested the Ross and Cromarty by-election in 1936. Churchill mourned his daughter Marigold in Scotland shortly after her death in 1921. The saga, then, is replete with anecdote, anger, joy, sorrow, and adventure. Churchill losing his Scottish seat in 1922 to a prohibitionist candidate is the grandest of punchlines.

And then there is the military history: Churchill's substantial connections with Scotland during the two World Wars. During World War I, Churchill commanded the 6th battalion of the Royal Scots Fusiliers on the western front.

His adjutant was Andrew Dewar Gibb (a future founder and leader of the SNP), who wrote a book about the experience. Gibb recorded Churchill saying to his troops that 'although an Englishman, it was in Scotland that I found the three best things in my life: my wife, my constituency and my regiment'.

Churchill's four Scottish secretaries of state during World War II represented all of the major parties of government: David John Colville (Conservative MP and not to be confused with Churchill's private secretary John Colville, himself the

The Roaring Lion, a portrait by Yousuf Karsh at the Canadian Parliament, December 1941



grandson of a Scottish peer), Ernest Brown (Liberal), Thomas Johnston (Labour), and the 6th earl of Rosebery (Liberal).

When trying to persuade Johnston to join his government, Churchill proclaimed: 'Good heavens, man, come in here and help me make history!' The prime minister picked Johnston because he was left-wing and could help prevent a repeat of the Red Clydesdale disruption that occurred during World War I.

Today there are Scottish connections which are good for trade

including his preference for Johnny Walker whisky, Drambuie liqueur, Dundee cake and Scottish grouse. But where are the books?

While there have been many articles and essays published about Churchill in Scotland over the years including one book about his time in Dundee, there has yet to be even one dedicated volume about Churchill and the Scots. The omission teeters on the bizarre given the vast library of books on seemingly every other facet of Churchill's life.

Churchill affected the Scots, and

more critically, the Scots affected him. So why have we forgotten?

The lay of the land

In 2019, MSP Ross Greer courted controversy when he tweeted that Churchill was a ‘white supremacist’ and a ‘mass murderer’. The tweet was interspersed with hand-clapping emojis and posted on 25 January, just after the anniversary of Churchill’s death. The shock value aside, the tweet revealed the pantomime view of Churchill that underpins his legacy in Scotland.

Pervasive myths continue to abound that Churchill abandoned the 51st Highland Division in 1940, set soldiers of the Black Watch on his Dundee constituency in 1911, ordered tanks into Glasgow in 1919 and would have abandoned Scotland if the Nazis invaded in 1940.

When Ivor Roberts-Jones’ statue of Churchill was vandalised in London’s Parliament Square few in Scotland were surprised. Yet Scots were left looking around for a comparable statue of Churchill to protest.

In Dundee, there is barely any touristic acknowledgement that Churchill was there at all. In the lobby of the Queen’s Hotel, there is a privately-funded plaque commemorating his campaign headquarters that went up in 2008. The formal Dundee acknowledgement is dire: there is one ‘official’ plaque. Unveiled in 2008 by Churchill’s daughter Lady Soames, the marker commemorated the centenary of Churchill’s first election to Parliament from the city in 1908. It was vandalised in the summer of 2020.

There are a smattering of other tributes to be found to Churchill across Scotland including a bust in the City of Edinburgh Council building and a Churchill suite in the Prestonfield Hotel. At the Dalmeny estate, family seat of the earldom of Rosebery, there is a tree planted by Churchill in 1946. And in Edinburgh Central Library there is a plaque honouring suffragist Elsie Inglis that includes a tribute from Churchill reading, ‘she will shine forever in history’.

In Glasgow’s Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, there is a four-

foot-high bronze figure of Churchill by Scottish sculptor David McFall. Rather aptly, this is a miniature version of the full-size statue erected in Churchill’s former constituency of Woodford in 1959. Over on the Orkney islands, Willie Budge’s 2011 monument to the Churchill Barriers at Scapa Flow is, appropriately, just a shadow of Churchill made from a rudder.

The social revolution

It is impossible to pronounce in absolutes, but observation, particularly of social media, reveals several core explanations and myths that reinforce general Scottish despondency over Churchill.

Firstly, there is the recurring belief that Churchill did not care about or was indifferent to Scotland. Nature abhors a vacuum, and without a coordinated academic pushback and a broader acknowledgement of his connections to Scotland, this will not

change. The International Churchill Society has recently begun that process.

Secondly, Churchill is falsely condemned as having tried to crush Scottish strikes. This in itself is considered an extension of perceived English and aristocratic suppression of the Scottish working class. Grievance myths make better soundbites than the truth on social media.

Thirdly, the case for Scottish independence is nearly always made in reaction to the British state, Brexit, and British history (of which Churchill is a giant). Churchill has become an extension of modern debates, politics and questions of cultural and historical legitimacy. He is something larger than ‘just’ another historical figure.

Fourthly, the prevalence of social media, in tandem with the absence of a single source or leading voice speaking about Churchill and Scotland, has allowed grievance politics to fill the void. There is a tremendous amount of



Winston Churchill reads a newspaper on the platform while waiting for a train at St Andrews during a trip to Scotland to visit Polish troops, inspect coastal defences and tour a Naval Establishment in Fife in October 1940

evidence, stories, pictures and diaries from which to read, but no central resource from which to spearhead a reconciliation between fact and myth.

Finally, modern Scottish education generally focuses on the misdeeds of the British empire, including slavery and colonialism, with no broader context of the time. This moral rigidity makes even passing praise for British imperialism or Churchill taboo and

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implicitly racist. While Churchill was not perfect, it is quite the claim to say he actively hated Scotland. The lack of consolidated material of Churchill's ties with Scotland is taken as a warped case in point, particularly on Twitter, where he is condemned as an English nationalist and imperialist.

Cultural amnesia

There is a persistent myth that Scotland is more left-wing than England. Repeated polls cannot give a definitive answer. 'Left-wing about what?' would be a better retort – one can be socially liberal and a hawk on defence without tautology. Still, Scottish exceptionalism is a normative and predominantly nationalist ideology about being a 'good global citizen'. Scotland is implicitly placed as morally superior to the UK government, the British empire and Churchill.

And yet Scotland, in partnership with England since 1707, built the British empire. At one stage, Scots were estimated to comprise one-third of all imperial governors. Scots provided vast numbers of traders, administrators and pioneers who took a considerable share of the imperial spoils. The extraordinary influence of Scots at nearly all levels of the empire makes today's acute case of cultural amnesia all the more puzzling.

Popular history is a supply and

demand industry. The popularity and awareness of Scottish tragedies such as the highland clearances have bolstered the politics of grievance. The British empire receives perfunctory attention at best despite Scotland's central role (Dundee, for example, was the 'juteopolis' of the empire). Churchill, long taken for granted alongside unionism, has fallen out of favour and cast as

the villain – much like the United Kingdom itself.

Social media, soundbites, and ferocious campaigns for Scottish independence and Brexit have bled nuance dry. Churchill is either a bogeyman or a hero; a visceral stand-in for debates on Scottish and British nationalism – usually in 280 characters.

Churchill lived for 90 years. He was born in the age of the cavalry charge and died when The Beatles were at their zenith. What Churchill said on race, women's suffrage and Irish Home Rule should all be anchored to their time to fairly judge what he said about them conclusively.

The reasons are not just the corrosiveness of social media. Churchill's life is not taught correctly in schools. Successive polling has shown that most UK students do not know who Churchill was or think he has been made-up.

So, are there any ways for Scots to think of Churchill as one of their own? Firstly, Churchill sincerely cared about Scotland. During his time as a Scottish MP, he was elected in Dundee five times, he served in a series of senior ministerial posts: president of the board of trade, home secretary, first lord of the admiralty, minister of munitions, and secretary of state for both war and air. All of these

ministries deeply involved Scotland.

Churchill was, in fact, the original nationalist – and a federalist to boot. Unionism and nationalism were always complimentary and interchangeable forces in Scotland for the first part of the 20th century – and Churchill knew this. As early as 1912, he looked forward to the day 'when a federal system will be established in these Islands which will give Wales and Scotland the control within proper limits of their own Welsh and Scottish affairs'.

So why Scotland's persistent rejection of Churchill today? Part of the problem is that he is considered an exclusively English figure. His daughter Mary Soames summarised it best in a letter to her father in his final years: 'I owe you what every English man, woman and child does - Liberty itself'.

Scots are no more cognitively dissonant about their history than any other country, but the UK is confused. Devolution is not mutually exclusive with British identity, but there is an undoubted scramble for the future that has little space for figures like Churchill.

In treating Scottishness as mutually exclusive with Britishness, we risk cutting ourselves off to our rich shared tapestry – including Winston Churchill. Churchill's ties to Scotland are staggering. At a time of such great constitutional uncertainty, to study Churchill is to explore Scotland's past fully.

There is more to Scotland and Churchill than people know. Churchill happily borrowed from Charles Murray when he told an Edinburgh audience: 'Auld Scotland counts for something still'. Indeed, it most definitely does.

Alastair Stewart is a public affairs consultant and freelance writer. He has written extensively about Churchill and Scotland for 'The Herald', 'The Scotsman', and 'The Times'. He is working with David Freeman, Neil McLennan and the International Churchill Society to consolidate Churchill's Scottish connections. Read the full Scotland edition of 'Finest Hour', the journal of the International Churchill Society, at: <http://bit.ly/3h58Clg>