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Chapter 3

Relocating the British subject; ethnographic encounters with identity politics and nationalism during the 2014 Scottish independence referendum

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Abstract

In this article, I use an ethnographic encounter in the aftermath of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum to explore questions of identity and nationalism in Scotland. During that encounter, I was confronted by my own, sometimes contradictory, thoughts and feelings about Britain, Britishness and Scotland. Taking inspiration from a genre of social scientific writing called ‘ethnographic memoir,’ the rest of the article is my attempt to work through, and make sense of, those thoughts and feelings. I do so by drawing on the work of both social anthropologists and sociologists who have written about identity, nationalism and legacies of empire in the UK. Following particularly the work of the social anthropologist Georgie Wemyss, who argues that contemporary discourses around ‘Britain’ legitimate what she calls ‘the invisible empire,’ I suggest that affirmations of Britain during the independence referendum helped empower an insidious, but largely taken for granted, discourse of imperial nationalism. This insight allows me to locate the source of my own disenchantment with the identity label ‘British.’ I then conclude by considering some of the wider implications this might

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have for a sub-discipline that calls itself the Anthropology of Britain.

Keywords

Scotland, Britishness/British Empire, nationalism, identity, ethnographic memoir, biography

Introduction

Identity and nationalism are rarely questions of the head or the heart alone. This is as true for social anthropologists, sociologists and other social scientists trying to make sense of identity politics in varied historical and socio-political contexts as it is for our ethnographic subjects and the institutions and social groups we study. This article represents my own efforts to reconcile contradictory commitments of my head and my heart in relation to these questions. In doing so, I draw inspiration from scholars writing in the tradition of ethnographic memoir, a genre of social scientific and literary writing closely allied to ethnography (see, for examples, Anderson, 2005; and Prahlad 2005). I do this deliberately, to highlight my ambiguous relationship to a former field site in which I carried out anthropological research on Scottish politics but in which I continue to live. Put simply, the memoir I share here is shaped in significant part by my own ethnographic immersion in a place that once seemed ‘foreign’ to me but which I now call home. When I explore identity in relation to Scotland and the UK, I am asking

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questions that, for me, are at the same time ethnographic and personal. This is not to equate the latter with the former. Rather, I turn to ethnographic memoir as a means of foregrounding both the biographical and reflexive dimensions of these questions. In so doing, I further the aims of this volume to draw on insights based on previous fine-grained ethnographic research as well as my own recent personal engagement in a local community to challenge stereotypes of Scottish nationalism and ‘Britishness’ in Scotland. This speaks to the interdisciplinary mission of social anthropology and how it can contribute to sociological analysis.

In this article, I explore the following puzzle: how did I, over the course of the two years leading up to the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, change from a voter who initially assumed he would support keeping Scotland within the UK to a reluctant supporter of the ‘Yes’ campaign? I suggest the key to understanding how my views changed resulted from my growing disenchantment with identity claims made in support of Britain and Britishness. As someone who was born and raised in Australia but now holds dual citizenship between my country of birth and the UK, I had not anticipated my political transformation on the question of Scottish independence. I had previously identified as ‘British,’ believing the label to be inclusive and encompassing of the national identities and personal histories of Commonwealth citizens and others. As the referendum neared and the campaign grew more politically heated, I started to question the efficacy of my assumed, ‘British’ identity. This article is my attempt to

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make sense of that process of disenchantment, intellectually and personally.

How my feelings of belonging and identity changed might also reflect shifts in my personal and professional locations within the UK, in relation to my former field site, a market town in southern Scotland called Dumfries. Thinking about this calls for attention to what the anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson once called ‘location work’ (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997), which challenges anthropologists and other scholars to think about questions of their own institutional, political and social locations in relation to their research subjects. I first came to Dumfries as a PhD student carrying out anthropological fieldwork, which became a study of the Scottish Conservative Party that I later published as an ethnographic monograph (see Smith, 2011). Since then, I have not conducted further ethnographic research in Scotland, though I settled in Dumfries and have been active in the local community. In the vernacular of social anthropology, I had ‘gone native.’ At the time of the referendum on Scottish independence, I chaired the Loreburn Community Council, an elected body that represents town centre residents. I also sat on the Local Authority’s Sub-Committee administering the Dumfries Common Good Fund and was a Founding Member of the Loreburn Hall Trust.

While sometimes conscious of my status as an ‘incomer’ (cf. Edwards, 2000), the fact that my father-in-law was a local Labour Party councilor at the time conferred upon me a degree of political capital in the wider community. In addition, my community

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activism in Dumfries proceeded alongside my academic career, firstly as a social anthropologist but then, later, as a sociologist who working at an English University. Every week, during term time, I commute south, leaving behind my former field site for my institutional ‘home’ in the West Midlands, a journey that I often felt mimicked the tensions between ‘home’ and ‘field’ that empower anthropological research practice (see Gupta and Ferguson, 1999). Combined with my ‘embeddedness’ in local connections of people and place, in which I remained ensnared after I finished my fieldwork in Dumfries in 2003, I felt that I retained an ethnographer’s sensibility in relation to questions of identity and nationalism in Scottish politics.

I begin with an ethnographic encounter, a conversation with my father-in-law in the days following the referendum. I describe this conversation as ‘ethnographic’ because it brought to the surface complicated feelings I had about the referendum result. This surprised me, given that through the campaign I had convinced myself I was an agnostic on the question of Scotland’s constitutional future, within or outside the UK. I then seek to put these feelings in context, historically, politically and sociologically. I proceed in four parts. After providing a brief overview of the two years leading up to the referendum, noting the key political events that shaped the debate and its aftermath, I consider how the meaning and nature of nationalism in general – and Scottish nationalism, in particular – was contested during the campaign. I then argue that critiques of ‘narrow nationalism’ deployed by ‘Better Together’ campaigners and other

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advocates for a United Kingdom helped empower a seemingly benign, inclusive narrative of 'Britain' and 'Britishness,' which was proposed as a 'common sense' alternative to Scottishness and Scottish independence. I turn to the work of the social anthropologist Georgie Wemyss (2009) to consider the hidden significance of not naming 'Britishness' a form of nationalism. She calls Britain and the values claimed in its name 'the invisible empire,' an insidious contemporary discourse that continues to legitimate and render natural a racialised and class-based national identity. This produces effects, for Scottish nationalists as well as English nationalists, and others. Drawing on my own biography, the final section of this article considers how this realization generated personal consequences for me, in terms of how I felt about belonging and identity. I conclude with some tentative suggestions for how sociologists and other social scientists might explore the politics of identity and nationalism in the UK today, including those committed to the sub-discipline of the Anthropology of Britain.

After the referendum: an ethnographic encounter

On 18 September 2014, Scotland held a referendum on whether or not to stay within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Both the Conservative-led UK Government in London and the Scottish National Party (SNP) Government in

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Edinburgh had agreed to recognize the referendum result and consider it legally binding. The rival campaigns, respectively to vote ‘Yes’ on the question of Scottish independence, or ‘No’ in support of the proposition that Scotland is ‘Better Together’ with England and the other constituent nations of the UK, had lasted two years. Turnout was unprecedented, with almost 85% of the electorate casting a ballot. With record participation, the result was a clear win for ‘No’ campaigners. 2,001,926 voters – or 55.3% of all ballots cast – rejected separation from the UK. Yet, support for ‘Yes’ was strong, with a substantial minority of 1,617,989 – 44.7% of all electors who voted – backing independence for Scotland. (1)

Two days after the referendum, I sat in a quiet corner of The Robert the Bruce, a Wetherspoons pub in Dumfries. My mood remained pensive and unsettled. My father-in-law had just bought the first round of drinks. I had not seen much of him, a Labour councilor, in the preceding months and he looked exhausted. Like others from his party, he had been campaigning relentlessly against a prospective ‘Yes’ victory in the referendum, his wife joining him while canvassing for both the ‘Better Together’ and ‘United with Labour’ campaigns. Having only just removed the ‘No, Thanks’ poster from the front window of his living room that weekend, I was not sure if he wanted to catch up or debrief.

We had barely touched our drinks before he told me of his relief that the referendum was over. It had been a ‘distraction,’ he said, ‘divisive,’ splitting families

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and neighbours. The question of whether Scotland should remain part of the UK was now settled, he explained. With the referendum over, my father-in-law felt he and his political colleagues could finally get on with the day-to-day business of administering Dumfries and Galloway Council after months of indecision and political hiatus.

There was a pause, more awkward than I expected. I asked the inevitable question. ‘Now that the Labour Party hasn’t got the referendum to distract it, what is it going to do?’ I said. ‘What do you want to achieve that you couldn’t get done before?’

My father-in-law drank slowly. He was being cautious now, picking his words carefully. The challenges ahead would be difficult, he said. Scottish Government funding for Council-run services was being cut. The ‘freeze’ on Council Tax, a popular policy of the SNP Government, had now been in place for several years and was preventing local governments across Scotland from raising revenues in line with inflation. This was compounding the ‘squeeze’ on the local government finances. £30 million worth of ‘savings’ – roughly 10% of Dumfries and Galloway Council’s budget – had to be found over the next three years.

‘So we are going to need to consult with local people about where to make the cuts,’ my father-in-law said. ‘That’s all local government will be about from now until the next Council election [in 2017]. People will have to be told they can’t have all the services they want and they will have to be told why. They then need to tell us what to protect. People want their bins emptied on time, same time every week. They want

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potholes fixed and roads maintained. That's what's important to most people. You may care about libraries and museums and the arts and other things but those services are secondary. We have to protect the 'front line.' The truth is, there is no vision out there, not from politicians in Edinburgh or Westminster, and we can't provide it. We're just going to have to consult with local people and make cuts to local services.'

My father-in-law took a sip from his pint. I was cautious now too, willing myself to choose my words carefully.

'What do you think?' he said.

I felt like I was being tested. I knew what I wanted to say. It had played over in my mind as I had endured his short monologue about budget cuts and what he saw as the poverty of imagination in our political leaders. Then, the words tumbled from my mouth.

'I think that what you just said was a strong argument for voting 'Yes' in the referendum.'

The resulting look on the face of my father-in-law told me that the promise of a pleasant couple of hours spent in the pub had now been thrown into jeopardy.

I could not understand why I was in a provocative mood. It was true that I had voted 'Yes' in the referendum but I had regarded myself an undecided voter throughout most of the two years of the campaign. My views on Scottish independence were, at root, or so I thought, agnostic. I also believed that I had been considering the arguments

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for, and against, independence as matters of the head, certainly not the heart. Now, I realized I had been kidding myself. Why did I feel so strongly about the outcome of the referendum, and why were my feelings manifesting themselves now?

Most people I know probably assumed I supported the idea that Scotland was 'Better Together' in a political union with England, Wales and Northern Ireland. During the campaign, prominent 'No' activists stopped me in the High Street and swapped stories, as if they were sharing confidences with a fellow political traveller. A prominent 'Yes' activist on the community council told me he thought I would vote 'No' to Scottish independence; he was delighted when he learned of my late defection. In addition, my wife told me that during the summer of 2014 she had argued with her mother and said we were both considering voting 'Yes' in the referendum. My mother-in-law had been appalled. 'Surely Alex would never vote for the Nationalists!'

If my mother-in-law was confused by the possibility of my voting 'Yes,' I was just as puzzled. If asked before the referendum, I would have described myself as 'British.' Such an identity seemed inclusive to me, particularly in terms of my biographical history. While I have lived in Scotland since 1999, I work at an English University. Furthermore, given that I was born and raised in Australia, I neither thought of myself as English or Scottish. The argument I had with my father-in-law in the aftermath of the referendum provoked me to reflect long and hard on why I had grown disenchanted with my former identity as 'British' or 'Australian-British' (or 'British-

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Australian’). Before exploring the reasons for this, I will provide an overview of some of the important political events that took place during the campaign. This will then allow me to consider the critiques of ‘narrow nationalism’ from opponents of Scottish independence, many of whom embraced an alternative, ‘British’ identity. I will suggest that this identity, set up in contrast with the presumed ‘nationalism’ of pro-independence activists, was often articulated as benign, inclusive and natural. I will then go on to argue that this presentation of Britishness warrants closer scrutiny, empowering as it does a narrative that the social anthropologist Georgie Wemyss has called ‘the invisible empire’ (Wemyss, 2009). What was being argued over was, in short, a struggle between two versions of nationalism. The clearest of these was the Scottish version, which was described at various times as civic or ethnic, as I will discuss below. The other was British and I suggest that in its contemporary form this is an example – or rather, an echo or memory – of an imperial nationalism. This second, British version, I suggest, is rarely challenged or examined as, itself, a form of nationalist commitment.

What happened in Scotland

Immediately following the referendum, political leaders opposed to Scottish independence moved quickly to claim victory. The morning after, the UK Prime Minister David Cameron spoke on behalf of those who had campaigned for ‘Better

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Together.’ Describing the result as ‘clear’ and ‘settled for a generation,’ he asserted that ‘there can be no disputes, no re-runs’ before stating that the three pro-Union parties were committed to ‘hearing’ the voices of the 1.6 million Scots who had voted to leave the UK. He then announced that Lord Smith of Kelvin would take charge of a process for agreeing new constitutional powers for the Scottish Parliament, on tax, spending and welfare. In the hours that followed, senior Labour politicians like former Prime Minister Gordon Brown endorsed David Cameron’s comments and re-committed to extending new powers to the Scottish Parliament.

Events also moved swiftly for the vanquished. Before the day was over, Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond resigned. His Deputy, Nicola Sturgeon, took over as interim leader. Weeks later, she was elected unopposed, as both leader of the SNP and First Minister of Scotland.

The result also generated problems for the Scottish Labour Party, which had lost almost 200,000 of its own voters to the ‘Yes’ camp. Johann Lamont, the party’s leader, resigned within days of the referendum, arguing that the UK Labour Party ran its affairs in Scotland as if the latter was ‘a branch office’ of London Labour. A leadership contest ensued, with Jim Murphy – a Scottish Member of Parliament (MP) who had served in the Cabinet under Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown – defeating Neil Findlay, a Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) from the Left. Campaigning against a ‘Yes’ vote, Murphy had visited 100 towns and cities before the referendum.

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Unlike many of his Labour colleagues, he claimed during media interviews that he had ‘relished’ the debate. With less than five months to go before the UK General Election of May 2015, Murphy now sought to throw himself into the electoral fight to come.

Despite losing the referendum, the SNP appeared empowered by the result. 100,000 people joined the party, quadrupling its membership. Opinion polling clearly suggested one in two Scottish voters now intended to support them at the General Election. Alex Salmond announced he would stand as a candidate in the forthcoming Westminster elections. The SNP hastily held candidate selections across the country. With his party now on a war footing, Jim Murphy tried to pull rank with Labour voters, predicting a vote for the SNP would only let the Tories get back into power ‘through the back door.’

Opinion polling continued to point to an overwhelming victory for the Scottish Nationalists. Still, the worst-case scenario – in which all Labour seats would be lost to the SNP – still seemed unlikely. Labour activists in Dumfries spoke earnestly of the need to have faith in the Smith Commission and ‘delivering the change Scotland needs,’ in so doing pegging prospective SNP gains in the General Election to a tally in the teens. ‘The only sure way of keeping the Tories out of power is to vote for a Labour government,’ several of them told me, a mantra repeated constantly on Labour’s promotional material in the final weeks of the campaign.

It turned out, for once, that the opinion polling was close to the mark. On what

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was a cataclysmic night politically for the Labour Party – which lost the UK-wide poll – the SNP won 56 of the 59 Westminster Parliamentary seats in Scotland. Scottish Labour was reduced from 42 seats to one. This was the same number held by the Conservatives in Scotland, the sum total of the latter's efforts to claw back support after their infamous electoral 'wipe out' in 1997 (cf. Seawright, 1999; Smith, 2011). The Scottish Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, saw their cohort of ten Members of Parliament also cut to just one. The three incumbent pro-UK MPs who held their seats did so with margins of less than 1000 votes over their respective, second-placed SNP challengers.

The sudden collapse of support for the Labour Party in Scotland alongside the dramatic rise in backing for the SNP in a First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) Westminster election was unprecedented and, certainly, unexpected prior to the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. Not even the destruction of the Scottish Conservatives at the 1997 General Election comes close as a comparison to the spectacle of the Labour Party's rout in Scotland in 2015. No one would have predicted such an outcome in May 2012, when the date of the referendum was announced. In June 2012, I published a Blogpost for Manchester University Press called 'Battle Now Joined for Scotland's Constitutional Future' in which I wrote:

'It is certainly true that the challenges ahead for the Scottish Nationalists in winning the referendum campaign should not be underestimated. The latest

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opinion polling suggests that, after recently peaking at just shy of 40%, support for independence has now dropped to 35% amongst Scottish voters. With 55% of the electorate behind them, those opposed to independence remain in the majority. These figures reinforce a pattern, which has remained consistent since the opening of the Scottish Parliament over a decade ago, that demonstrates no more than about a third of Scots support independence.’

At the time of making these observations, I did not consider them controversial or prescient. They were clearly supported by the anthropological and sociological literature documenting the ebbs and flows of Scottish nationalism since the early 1970s (e.g. Hearn, 2000; McCrone, 1992). However, in light of ‘Yes’ achieving 45% of the vote in the referendum, that a much-smaller number of Scots historically supported independence until 2014 is a fact that has now become redundant. Re-reading the Blogpost after the referendum, it struck me as remarkable that during the two years of campaigning that followed its publication, support for the ‘Better Together’ campaign remained unchanged. Put simply, it would appear that ‘Better Together’ failed to grow the ‘No’ vote beyond the 55% of Scots who seem to have backed their cause from the beginning.

Over 15% of the electorate, in June 2012, had been open-minded or undecided on the question of whether Scotland should remain within the UK. If most of these

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voters had ended up deciding to back Scottish independence, this was a political surprise for strategists and pundits on both sides of the debate. Conventional political wisdom would normally dictate that undecided voters are instinctively cautious and will usually agree to support the status quo than vote for radical change. ‘Convincing sceptical voters to take a leap into the constitutional dark and back independence remains a massive mountain for the SNP to climb between now and the 2014 referendum,’ I had written in that same Blogpost.

The constitutional future of Scotland might therefore seem less certain than the apparent ‘decisiveness’ (to paraphrase David Cameron) of the referendum result itself. This unsettled state of affairs is all the more surprising when placed in a longer historical trajectory. Over fifteen years ago, when the Scottish Parliament opened on 1 July 1999 following a successful referendum on devolution held during the first years of the Blair Government, the political consensus at Westminster was that devolution would kill off the cause of Scottish nationalism for a generation or more. Prime Minister Tony Blair said that devolution would ‘cement’ the union echoing comments from 1995 when his colleague George (later Lord) Robertson, then Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, proclaimed that ‘devolution would kill nationalism stone dead’ (quoted in Warner, 2007). In addition, many also thought that the Proportional Representation (PR) voting system adopted for Scottish Parliament elections would prevent the Scottish Nationalists – or indeed any other political party – ever securing an outright majority at

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Holyrood. As the recipient of the most votes and therefore seats in Scotland, the Labour Party anticipated several Scottish Parliamentary terms in administration, albeit with the Liberal Democrats as junior partners in coalition government. As it turned out, the Labour-Liberal Democrat Scottish Executive lasted two terms before the SNP won more seats than other parties in 2007. They ran a minority administration before securing an outright majority of seats in the Scottish Parliament in 2011.

It is evident much has changed in Scotland over the last two decades. However, the reasons why different people voted 'Yes' or 'No' in the 2014 referendum are varied and complex. Much of the political analysis, of the referendum results as well as the Labour Party's wipeout in Scotland at the 2015 General Election, has focused on the emergence of a new partisanship in Scotland, which posits a commitment to nation or national identity. This now trumps old class-based loyalties, so the argument goes, on which the Labour Party traded for the last half-century (McCrone 1992, Hassan and Warhurst, 2002).

I suspect there is validity in this argument. However, it is worth asking, in light of the fact that a majority of Scots voted to stay in the UK, just to which 'nation' people north of the English-Scottish border believe themselves to belong? I hope, in the remainder of this article, to demonstrate that it would be overly simplistic to equate 'Yes' voters with a commitment to Scottish Nationalism without paying sufficient heed to the question of whether many 'No' voters themselves are somehow invested,

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culturally and emotionally, in a commitment to what I will call British Nationalism. I do this deliberately. Unlike its Scottish counterpart, Britishness is rarely examined in the popular media as an example of nationalism. This has important cultural, political and social consequences, not just for constitutional politics in the UK but also for how social anthropologists, sociologists and others seek to apprehend 'Britain' as an analytical object.

Scottish nationalism: a contested view

Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, nationalism re-emerged as a social force in Central and Eastern Europe as well as an object of study for both social anthropologists and sociologists. Building on the canonical work of earlier scholars like Benedict Anderson (1983), Ernest Gellner (2006 [1983]) and Eric Hobsbawm (1990), anthropological and sociological research was pursued during the 1990s against a backdrop of ethnic violence, in Africa, Asia and the former Yugoslavia, as 'old' states broke up and new (or sometimes newly-imagined) but previously-stateless nations sought to assert themselves. For many, the scale and brutality of the genocides in the Balkans and in Rwanda seemed an unwelcome reminder of the legacies of fascism and Nazism in Europe as well as imperialism in Africa. The re-emergence of older, seemingly 'primordial' ties to 'nationhood' and the nation-state struck many scholars as a problem to be solved, a problem especially perplexing at the very moment

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when globalization was extending its reach and intensifying its grip on the former Soviet republics and countries of the old Communist Bloc. If the world was to avoid the destructive spiral of sectarian violence that haunted the first half of the twentieth century, nationalism was viewed as a reactionary ideology – a pathology, even – that needed to be challenged in the service of building a contemporary, inclusive, cosmopolitan polity.

One important scholarly debate that ensued focused on a controversial question: is it possible to find forms of nationalism that are not underpinned by, and in turn legitimate, racist or sectarian identities that might lead to worse: ethnically based, genocidal violence? Or must all forms of nationalism be written off because of several well-publicized accounts of murderous, ethnic nationalism?

In his 1995 book ‘Banal Nationalism,’ the social psychologist Michael Billig argued that even when national identity is registered at its most banal – such as through the following of football teams, the saluting of flags and the singing of national anthems – a country’s people is subconsciously ‘primed’ to support heinous acts their leaders may wish to carry out in the name of their nation. Not all social anthropologists and sociologists agree with this view of nationalism. Some have distinguished between examples of *ethnic* nationalism, a pernicious ideology fueling sectarian hatreds and inspiring violence and mass murder, and more *civic* forms of nationalism, grounded in shared values and cultural institutions. For example, Quebecois nationalists abandoned

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political violence in the 1970s, instead embracing the ballot box as their preferred instrument for advancing their cause for secession from the Canadian state. This led to Quebecois nationalism being reimagined as an exemplar of civic nationalism, an argument for self-government for a people distinguished by their own language and what the anthropologist Richard Handler once described as a ‘politics of culture’ (1988) rather than a separate, ethnic identity.

In Western Europe, Scottish Nationalism – along with the Catalans in Spain as well as their fellow Welsh in the UK – sparked scholarly attention in debates over whether the SNP represented traditions of civic nationalism (cf. Alter, 1985: 99-103; Brand, 1990; Cohen, 1996, 1999; Guibernau, 1996: 101; Hearn, 2000; Henderson, 2001; Kellas, 1992; Lynch, 1996; Nairn, 1997). Former First Minister Alex Salmond is widely credited as having led the party away from older forms of what might be described as an ethnic nationalism grounded in a romantic sense of Scottish identity and a hostility to Englishness (Macwhirter, 2014, Torrance, 2014). Under his leadership, from the 1990s onwards, Mr. Salmond sought to present national identity in Scotland as based on shared political values and a sense of community, rather than ethnicity or history. Writing in an American newspaper in 2012, Mr. Salmond said:

‘In a process of self-government that has taken the best part of the last century, not one person has ever died arguing for or against Scottish independence. The

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national movement in Scotland is peaceful, democratic and civic in its nature – something perhaps, in this troubled world, to be encouraged ...’ (*The Washington Post*, 7 December 2012)

Others in the SNP endorsed his view, with the Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs Fiona Hyslop arguing the SNP represents a ‘grand, progressive civic nationalism’ at their 2012 Party Conference. Salmond’s rendering of Scottish nationalism has also found support amongst some academics, Bloggers and journalists (cf. Devine, 1999, Green, 2014, Macwhirter, 2014).

However, categorizing Scottish nationalism in this way has not been without controversy. In a passionate, pro-Union speech on the eve of the referendum, former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown urged Scots not to allow ‘narrow nationalism’ to ‘split asunder’ what England and Scotland and the other constituent nations of the UK ‘have built together.’ In April 2014, the journalist David Torrance – a supporter of ‘Better Together’ – wrote:

‘... [In] reality modern Scottish Nationalism is neither wholly ethnic nor wholly civic, but rather a mixture of the two. This is clear to anyone who regularly attends Nationalist gatherings. Although conferences are tamer affairs (they often resembled clan gatherings in the 1970s), last September’s pro-

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independence rally on Calton Hill was ostentatiously ethnic, with a plethora of kilts, face paint, frayed banners and unsavoury characters from fringe European secessionist movements...’ (*Sunday Herald*, 13 April 2014)

Similarly, several academics have argued that Scottish nationalism incorporates ethnic as well as civic elements (e.g. Jackson, 2014, Mycock, 2012). Meanwhile, during the referendum campaign itself, many Bloggers attacked SNP activists and ‘Yes’ supporters who had promoted anti-English views that, in their view, displayed a commitment to ‘ethnic’ nationalism. For example, in a post called “‘Civic’ nationalism? Yeah right,” one Blogger listed Tweets and other comments taken from social media that demonstrated a dislike – or what he called ‘hatred’ – towards the English. In his view, this betrayed the ethnic/sectarian roots of Scottish nationalism.

Given the troubled legacy of nationalism, from the early twentieth century onwards, it is understandable that attempts to define Scottish nationalism as either ‘civic’ or ‘ethnic’ would be contested. My purpose here is not to take a view that Scottish nationalism takes one form or the other. Rather, I want to make the point that academic debates about nationalism are echoed in political and media debates beyond the academy and that these debates produce political effects. For Alex Salmond and the ‘Yes’ campaign, it was of potential electoral consequence if voters viewed Scottish nationalism as fundamentally ‘civic’ – and therefore inclusive – in its composition. For

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those opposed to the SNP, it was important to challenge such a view, to frame nationalism in Scotland as ‘ethnically’ Scottish and exclusive. However, I want to now argue that the struggle that took place in Scotland during the 2014 referendum was, in part, between two kinds of nationalism. Whereas what defines Scottish nationalism – institutionally as well as in substance – was widely debated, that other nationalism went largely unexamined. That ‘nationalism’ is British. I will suggest that claims about ‘Britishness’ and what it means to belong to ‘Britain’ should have rightly been subjected to the same scholarly and media scrutiny to that which has applied to Scottish nationalism. Despite attempts by a handful of pro-independence Bloggers, SNP supporters and figures on the radical English Left like Billy Bragg (2014), a critique of British Nationalism did not gain purchase in the mainstream media. Following the social anthropologist Georgie Wemyss (2009), I suggest that this is because Britain Nationalism is invisible. Claims made by advocates for Britain and British identity disguise Britishness itself as a form of nationalist commitment. Like Scottish Nationalism, it combines ethnic and civic elements. To illustrate, and remembering my earlier ethnographic encounter after the 2014 referendum, I return to my own personal biography.

The ‘Invisible Empire’

As I stated earlier, I gravitated towards the cause of ‘Better Together’ at the beginning

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of the referendum campaign. I believe this was because I thought of myself, fundamentally, as ‘British.’ Although I am a sixth generation Australian, I regard my family as being Anglophile in socio-cultural outlook. My ancestry is overwhelmingly Cornish, with strong traditions of Methodism and Anglicanism. My parents and grandparents viewed the cultural institutions of Britain – the BBC and its universities, especially – as superior to those of Australia. The secondary school I attended, which was fee-paying, styled itself as an Antipodean version of a prestigious English grammar school. My maternal grandmother ran an upmarket gift shop in the leafy eastern suburbs of Adelaide specializing in importing goods from Britain; her shop did a roaring trade around the Royal Wedding in 1983. In all the major debates about Australia’s constitutional future and national identity, my family sided firmly with the Queen and the ‘mother country,’ as my grandmother called Britain.

It could be argued that even before I came to the UK, I had been educated and culturally immersed within British traditions and values. Instinctively, I recognized the version of ‘Britishness’ that Prime Minister David Cameron articulated when he spoke at the 2008 Scottish Conservative Party conference in Ayr:

‘Being British is one of the most successful examples of inclusive civic nationalism in the world. We can be a shining example of what a multi-ethnic, multi-faith, multi-national society can and should be.’ (BBC News Online, 23

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May 2008)

Apart from the fact that David Cameron's speech included a rare acknowledgement that being British constitutes a nationalist commitment in itself, his claim of what it means to be British is controversial. It was certainly not the view of British Nationalism shared by SNP activists and supporters. When she asserted that the SNP represented 'grand progressive civic nationalism,' Fiona Hyslop MSP described British nationalism as 'narrow, chippy and hostile,' citing examples in support of her claim including skepticism towards membership of the European Union and a 'national myth of military power' (cf. Taylor 2012). However, despite the critique of Hyslop and a few other supporters of independence, I have little recollection of British Nationalism being subjected to the same level of scrutiny and challenge as its Scottish counterpart. Importantly, such claims are political and, in the context of the independence referendum, produced political effects.

As the 'Better Together' and 'Yes' campaigns were both launched following the 2012 Scottish local government elections, I published the post I mentioned above on the Manchester University Press Blog. I wrote, with a sense of personal optimism, that '[while] it is likely that a focus on the negative consequences and practical uncertainties of independence may help 'No' campaigners win the referendum, it is also true that they need to make an equally positive case for Scotland remaining within the United

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Kingdom.’ In other words, this was an opportunity to make a positive case for belonging to Britain. Late in the campaign, opinion polling suggested many undecided Scottish voters disliked what they perceived to be an overly negative campaign from ‘Better Together.’ Even later – and some worried too late at the time – several leading Unionists attempted to make the positive argument for Britain. Perhaps the most notable of these was former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown. When in government, in 2007, he had put forward controversial proposals to celebrate Britishness and British values. In a speech to the Commonwealth Club on 27 February 2007, he said:

‘[When] people are also asked what they admire about Britain, more usually it is our values: British tolerance, the British belief in liberty and the British sense of fair play. Even before America said in its constitution it was the land of liberty and erected the Statue of Liberty, I think Britain can lay claim to the idea of liberty. Out of the necessity of finding a way to live together in a multinational state came the practice of tolerance, then the pursuit of liberty and the principle of fairness to all. Indeed Britain is a country that not only prides itself in its fairness, tolerance and what George Orwell called decency but ... wants to be defined by it, defined by being a tolerant, fair and decent country.’

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Certainly, my Anglophile relatives in Australia would have embraced this view of Britain. Gordon Brown's claim that 'it was in the name of liberty that in the 1800s Britain led the world in abolishing the slave trade' and that 'so too, in the 1940s, in the name of liberty, Britain stood firm against fascism' would have been celebrated by my grandparents in particular.

However, as several social anthropologists and sociologists building on the work of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and others have argued, this representation of Britain and British values itself suffers from an historical amnesia (cf. Tyler, 2012; Wemyss, 2009). Not once in his speech did Gordon Brown mention the British Empire, and it is very much within the context of being part of that empire that my grandparents would have celebrated and taken pride in what he claimed to be Britain's achievements and values. As Georgie Wemyss has argued, what I am calling here British Nationalism is empowered by the invisibility of the empire that had been built in Britain's name:

'In varying levels of sophistication, the discourse [of the 'Invisible Empire'] consistently asserts particular narratives of Britain's past whilst suppressing alternative histories, especially about the British Empire and related histories of white violence. When it does acknowledge the British Empire, it is a discourse of merchants and the spread of civilization that suffocates competing memories' (Wemyss, 2009: 3)

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Omitting mention of the British Empire from the former Prime Minister's speech is important because the 'invisible empire' contributes to the empowering of 'dominant white discourse, asserting positive narratives about Britain's colonial past and obscuring contesting histories' (Wemyss, 2009: 12). This helps privilege, and contributes to the naturalization of, white experience, 'making the white subject invisible by normalizing it' (Wemyss, 2009: 13).

Not only is Britain, together with its invisible empire, imagined in these terms as 'white.' It also lends itself to a particular rendering of Englishness, which Katharine Tyler has unpacked in terms of its constructions of both class and race (Tyler 2012). In Scotland, though, this version of British Nationalism eclipses Englishness as a category to which many who live north of the England-Scotland border might consider themselves belonging. After all, it makes little sense to be an English Nationalist in Scotland. For this reason, I began the referendum campaign imagining myself as British, though I recognize the constructs both Tyler and Wemyss explore in the kind of upbringing I enjoyed as a child in Australia. It was when I acknowledged this, in the context of debates over Scottish independence, I began to question my belief that I belonged to a place called 'Britain' (albeit having originated from Australia). I became disenchanted with the idea of Britishness. This opened up intellectual and emotional space that rendered me available to becoming a 'Yes' convert in the 2014 referendum.

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For me, the final nail in the coffin of my commitment to Britain – the moment my disenchantment with Britishness achieved completion – came when George Galloway, the maverick MP for Bradford West, toured Scotland to argue against Scottish independence and promote a new book. ‘When Hitler was standing at the Channel Ports, when the RAF was fighting the Luftwaffe, no one cared if a pilot was from Sutherland or Southwark,’ he said at a hustings in Portobello. As Britain stood alone against Nazi Germany, Galloway claimed, ‘leaders of the SNP were interned. They were collaborating with Hitler seeking to open channels with him to let him into this island’ (Hassan 2014). In my view, this statement was not only ludicrous. It was also dismissive of the importance of the British Empire – rendered here invisible – in sustaining the ‘mother country’ in its war against Germany. I had grown up with stories of the sacrifices made by Australians and other Commonwealth citizens to Britain’s war effort. These were foundational to my grandparents’ mythology of themselves, as British subjects. It was as if the contributions of veterans like my maternal grandfather, who had come to Britain as an RAAF pilot and flown for Bomber Command in 1944-45, had now been airbrushed from history, along with the rest of the British Empire. No one may have cared if a pilot was from Sutherland or Southwark; nor did they care if they came from Saskatchewan or South Australia.

Relocating the British subject

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When former Prime Minister Gordon Brown spoke on the eve of the Scottish referendum, it was hailed as one of the most important speeches of his political career. Drawing on arguments he articulated the year before in his book ‘My Scotland, Our Britain: A Future Worth Sharing,’ he said that ‘[the] vote tomorrow is not about whether Scotland is a nation – we are, yesterday, today and tomorrow’:

‘It’s not about whether there is a Scottish Parliament – we have it. It’s not about whether there are increased powers, we are all agreed to increase the powers ... The vote tomorrow is whether you want to break and sever every link, and I say let’s keep our UK pensions, let’s keep our UK pound, let’s keep our UK passports, let’s keep our UK welfare state.’

Britain – now emphasized as the UK – had fought and won wars, Mr. Brown said. It had ‘built the peace together’ as well as established the NHS and the welfare state. It is telling, however, that in his speech Gordon Brown differentiates Scotland from the UK/Britain, the latter being something else: ‘a multinational state.’ What kind of multinational state? There was no mention, of course, of that other history, ‘built together’ by its constituent nations in the name of Britain: the (invisible) Empire.

The absence of Britain’s imperial history from such declarations of what Britain is and what Britishness represents speaks volumes about the tensions that are core to

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renderings of British identity today. These tensions have political consequences for how we conceive of both community and constitution within, what still remains, the United Kingdom. They point to new opportunities for social anthropologists, sociologists and others to reconsider their subject of study or, to put it another way, to relocate the British subject.

1.6 million Scots voted for independence from the UK. It seems reasonable to speculate that the majority of these people imagine themselves belonging to a political community other than Britain. Yet, they were unsuccessful in securing through the ballot box an independent Scotland so they remain within the boundaries of the political community that the UK constitutes. There is a tension here, then. Is it plausible to ascribe to those who identify themselves as Scottish Nationalists the label British? For social anthropologists, sociologists and others, is Britain good to think with? As the Scottish independence referendum demonstrated, there are significant (minority) populations living within the borders of the UK who may now no longer identify themselves as 'British,' if they did before. To frame social anthropological or sociological analyses of Scots, Welsh, Irish or even English communities as studies of the 'British' risks unintentionally reinforcing identity claims that have consequences for politics and community. Such work must proceed reflexively and attend to themes of the post-imperial (British) imagination if we, as scholars, are to avoid uncritically endorsing renderings of Britain like that which former Prime Minister Gordon Brown

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articulated or which draw power on a misplaced nostalgia for a lost, imperial past.

It would be more accurate, then, to put Britain forward as both a field site in the anthropological tradition but also a 'sight' within the sociological and wider public imagination. It is not simply a site to know but a site of knowledge that, itself, helps powerfully shape the conditions by which it is known. I am arguing for the de-territorialising of both anthropological and sociological studies of 'Britain,' 'Britishness' and British identity. Britain exerts a presence in the imaginations of Commonwealth migrants, former settler populations and the colonized peoples of the former empire that, while remaining invisible in many contemporary political narratives of what it means to be British, nonetheless empowers the idea of Britain today. Put simply, if some within the UK no longer identify as British, it is equally true that around the world, 'subjects' like my grandparents might have justifiably claimed a belonging to Britain. Indeed, when I opened my grandfather's enlistment papers from the Second World War, now housed in the National Archives of Australia, I was surprised to read that his nationality was labeled 'British' even though he had been born in Australia (as had his parents). How such an identity had been constituted, historically, was through a dialectic between British subjects here and British subjects 'out there' – 'Down Under,' 'Across the Pond,' in former colonial possessions, in Africa, South Asia and the West Indies. Britain and Britishness need to be unpacked and explored, their consequences and political effects accounted for and taken seriously.

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At best, as a ‘place,’ Britain and Britishness are ideologically contested. As a constitutional ‘space,’ following the Scottish independence referendum, it certainly remains unsettled. The debate over Scotland’s place in Britain – if the latter remains a meaningful ‘place’ to speak of – continues. On 23 June 2016, the UK held a referendum on whether or not to remain a member of the European Union (EU). A narrow majority (51.9%) voted to ‘leave.’ While uneven across the country, support for staying in the EU was particularly high in London (59.9%), Northern Ireland (55.8%) and Scotland (62%), where every single Local Authority voted to ‘remain’ in the EU. In contrast to the strident tone taken by Theresa May’s Conservative Government at Westminster, which has prioritized securing border and immigration controls during Brexit negotiations, the SNP Government favours staying in the European single market. Whether this is possible while Scotland stays part of the UK seems unlikely. For this reason, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has suggested that leaving the single market ‘undoubtedly’ brings a second referendum on Scottish independence closer. The political stakes are high, though. It is not certain that, following Brexit, the SNP will succeed in converting enough former ‘No’ voters to their cause in a second referendum on Scottish independence. Scotland appears divided as ever and there is bitterness, still, on both sides.

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Notes

(1) National and international media organizations extensively covered the referendum on Scottish independence. My primary source of the electoral data quoted here is the BBC (cf. <http://www.bbc.com/news/events/scotland-decides/results>)

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