

There's no place like home



Homecoming aims to celebrate Scotland's contribution to the world. But is it a reflection of our lives now, a chance to champion heritage – or simply a marketing exercise? *bulletin* interviewed Professors Tom Devine and David McCrone (right) to hear what they think the events say about our national identity in 2009.

What's positive about Homecoming? That it is happening at all. It couldn't have occurred 30 years ago. It reflects a greater awareness of the Scottish people's outreach over the centuries and a growing historical sophistication and understanding.



There are aspects of Homecoming that would gain anyone's unqualified approval. The grass-roots dimension and the music programme are extremely interesting. There are also a series of academic events, including the Scottish Diaspora debate in the Parliament, that will be important and engaging.

But the central problem is that Homecoming has only made a connection with one part of Scotland's historic diaspora: North America.

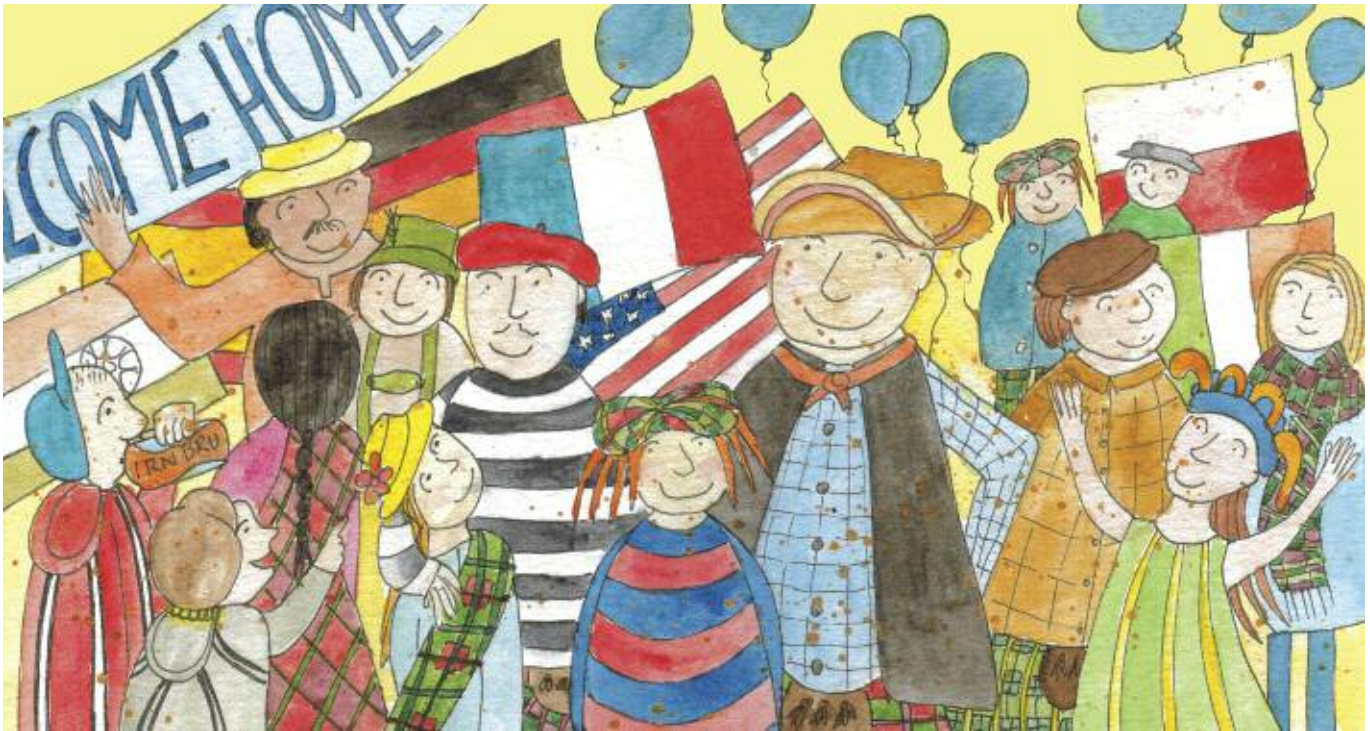
We've been sending people abroad for seven centuries. Only in the last 10 years has there been net in-migration to Scotland. The kind of Homecoming event I'm envisaging would allow the Scottish people to be instructed that this is one of the very few diasporic nations in the world. But there is no meaningful campaign as part of Homecoming to appeal to Ulster, England, Europe or South Africa.

If you extend this vision of the Scottish external connection to some of these other diasporas, you begin to see the huge impact the Scots have had on education, politics, philosophy and medicine across the world. I'm not suggesting Homecoming should be marketed throughout the globe, but it at least should incorporate an awareness of that dimension.

Most of those who will be coming from abroad for Homecoming will be North Americans. This highlights one of the biggest tensions in the project: the clash between indigenous Scottish identity in 2009 and Scottish-American identity, an identity that has been forged through the invention of tradition, built around tartanry and Highlandism. In order to facilitate the process of seducing the American audience, the organisers of Homecoming have had to adopt those markers of Scottishness, which many Scots of today would think of as kitsch.

This American audience is mainly indifferent to modern Scotland. Their interest is in a historic Scotland: a vision of a romantic past. As part of Homecoming there will be a 7,000-person march, the Gathering of the Clans, led by the 'clan chiefs'. Given that the great removals from the Highlands in the 18th and 19th centuries were orchestrated by their ancestors – as commercial landlords – most Scots would find this idea deeply ironic.

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The Homecoming celebrations tell us that there are many different ways of being a Scot: being born here, having parents or grandparents born here, or simply living here. Indeed, if you want to be a Scot, you have a number of 'identity markers' at your disposal.



Research on national identity that I have conducted with my colleague Frank Bechhofer indicates that people make their claims to be Scottish on all sorts of grounds, and most of these are accepted, including being born here – not something we can do anything about! There is no one way of being Scottish, any more than there is a single Scottish culture. We are a mongrel nation; indeed, that itself is a characteristic way of being Scottish.

Homecoming does not necessarily define Scottishness simply as a 'cultural export' in the way that some of its critics have implied. Instead, it recognises the diverse ways of being Scottish. If we start saying that you are a Scot only by ancestry or birth, you infer that some people are excluded. Anyway, none of us can do a thing about where our parents decided we would be born, or what our ancestors got up to.

It's also important to say that there's nothing wrong with marketing Scotland. We have a long and interesting history; it's amazingly diverse. We have a tourist industry going back at least to the days of Walter Scott.

We've been sending people around the world for a long time, such that many people living abroad have Scottish ancestors. We can get carried away celebrating the 'blood line' – and if we do we then ignore lots of other ways of being Scottish. Homecoming is good if it encourages people to come here. It's not good if it implies that you can only be Scottish if your granny is a MacTavish, to coin a phrase. After all, many Scots went abroad over the centuries, and made contributions to their new home, just as many people have settled in Scotland and make a huge contribution here. They're just as Scottish as people who left. I was born and brought up in Scotland, and have been here all my life. Those who have chosen to live here are just as Scottish as I am.

It's been claimed the Homecoming celebrations have too strong a focus on appealing to a North American audience. If that's the case, it wouldn't make very good business sense. We have many people around the world who feel some attachment to Scotland. Our oldest allies, after all, are the French. Why shouldn't

we interest them in coming to a country that has some affinity with them? And the 'auld enemy', England, is the country most like ours, and the one we've lived with since the island existed. We've just completed some survey work in England. Guess who they see as the people they have most in common with? The Scots. England is our biggest neighbour and our biggest market.

Concerns have also been expressed about the way Homecoming relates to Scottish nationalism. There is, in my mind, very little link between a lack of understanding in Scotland of our own history and a rise in the popularity of political nationalism. I know that some say that we have neglected our history, but there's also the view that we became obsessed by it. Nationalism has developed for 'political' reasons. Over the last 30 years, we've needed more self-government, reflected in our growing sense of being first Scottish, but also British. Ours is not an 'ethnic' nationalism in which some people don't have the correct culture or skin colour, and so are not 'one of us'. It's 'civic', in that you can be a Scot by aspiration, by residence, and, of course, voting for our Scottish Parliament. There has been a growing 'cultural' sense of being Scottish – music, literature, the arts – but people's sense of being Scottish is not directly linked to their political or constitutional preferences.

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We've become more sophisticated in our national identity over the last 30 years ... The modern Scot is now pretty sniffy about traditional Highlandism

We have become more sophisticated and confident in our national identity over the last 20 or 30 years. The White Heather Club, Andy Stewart and Moira Anderson sit uncomfortably with the modern Scot. But what's being marketed by Homecoming now is very much an incarnation of that. The modern Scot is pretty sniffy about this traditional Highlandism in a way that was not the case in the 1950s.

While I understand that Homecoming should be celebratory, there is also danger of becoming triumphalist. We've long suffered from what I call the Burns Supper School of Scottish History, which tends to be based on a form of ethnic conceit – here's tae us, wha's like us? There's a risk of that being perpetuated by Homecoming.

A significant gesture would be to remember some of the darker elements of Scottish history by extending an invitation to Homecoming to Caribbean populations, many of whom bear Scottish names. The role of Scots in the slave plantations in the Caribbean at the height of Empire needs to be aired and discussed. But again, that's missing. We don't need to carry out a public act of contrition for what our ancestors did but we could demonstrate that a mature nation is prepared to look at its past, warts and all.

Indeed, one of the bizarre aspects of Scotland since the mid-20th century has been the amnesia about Empire until recent years. In

the 1960s and 1970s the Scot preferred the role of victim. It was in this period that John Prebble's books were the most popular form of historical literature in Scotland – Culloden, the Highland Clearances, the Darien Disaster – all concentrating on Scottish disasters, the chip on the shoulder and victimhood. But even the most superficial understanding of our role in Empire would conclude that we were the colonisers, not the colonised!

How could we inform Scots about the realities, and help forge a more balanced view of our diasporic role? The teaching of Scottish history in our schools needs to better capture the tension between our national history and the wider European and world history.

Ironically this comes back to Homecoming, because the Scottish Diaspora is a way of linking Scotland to the rest of the globe. Our worldwide impact could be used as a route from the national story into the international story. One of my recent books, *Scotland's Empire: 1600 – 1815* (2003) was about the global reach of the Scots during the early two centuries of imperialism. But in order to write it I had to read widely in the historiography of the USA, Canada, Australasia and India during that period, before I could even start to locate the Scottish factor in the story.

It would be impossible to write a general study of modern Scotland today without stressing the interconnection with Empire and diaspora. The effect of Empire was so profound in the making of this country; every part of Scottish life was penetrated by it. That tells us that it's false to end our national story where the land ends."

Professor Tom Devine is the Sir William Fraser Professor of Scottish History and Palaeography, Director of the Scottish Centre of Diaspora Studies and Head of the School of History, Classics and Archaeology. The Scottish Centre for Diaspora Studies was established in Spring 2008 to advance historical enquiry into the subject. For more information visit www.shc.ed.ac.uk/centres/scdt/about.htm

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There is also an accusation that Homecoming celebrates 'Scottishness' by employing artificial symbols and paraphernalia. But lots of our favourite cultural institutions – kilts, haggis, tartan, even golf – we borrowed from other people and made our own. Borrowing is fine, as long as we don't think we have sole rights over things, or more dangerously, that only certain kinds of people have the right to use them. Back in the 1990s I wrote a book about Scottish heritage. It convinced me that Scottish was a matter of doing, rather than being; in other words, most folk don't get terribly precious about heritage. I remember talking to an old man who had set up the Tartan Society. "Wear what you like," he said. "The great thing about tartan is that it's very flexible; it can be re-invented."

Homecoming represents an opportunity to raise awareness of Scots' cultural history and impact on the world. We have a huge advantage that globally people know of us and our culture. 'The brand' works. We shouldn't exaggerate it any more than we should deplore it. It's out there whether we like it or not. At times, though, I think we suffer from the 'dearie me' factor: the belief that somehow we're not doing it right, or no good will come of it, or we'll pay for it in the long run. Of course, we should do our best, and not inadvertently damage our culture. But cultures are amazingly robust. They'll be here long after we're gone.

A celebration of Scotland's heritage, culture and national identity can truly engage Scots about their own history if it's undertaken with good humour. We don't take kindly to being preached at, least of all by academics. Don't turn it into a battleground about what is the right and wrong way to do it. Looking back over the last 50 years, I'm cheered with how far we've come in terms of our culture and national identity. We are a people of many opinions, a lot of them contrary and self-contradictory. That's the Scottish way. If it's your way, then you're one of us."

David McCrone is Professor of Sociology, and co-director of the University of Edinburgh's Institute of Governance, which he co-founded in 1997. Along with Frank Bechhofer, he has been working on issues of national identity in Scotland and England since the early 1990s, most notably in the context of constitutional change.

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About Homecoming

Homecoming Scotland 2009 is a project that aims to celebrate Scotland's contributions to the world. Events throughout the year will mark the 250th anniversary of Robert Burns' birth, honour famous Scots, innovations and achievements, and explore our culture and heritage overall. Homecoming is an initiative of the Scottish Government managed by Event Scotland in partnership with Visit Scotland. The University will be hosting a special event on St Andrew's Day (30 November) to mark the year of Homecoming. For more information, visit www.homecomingscotland.com

