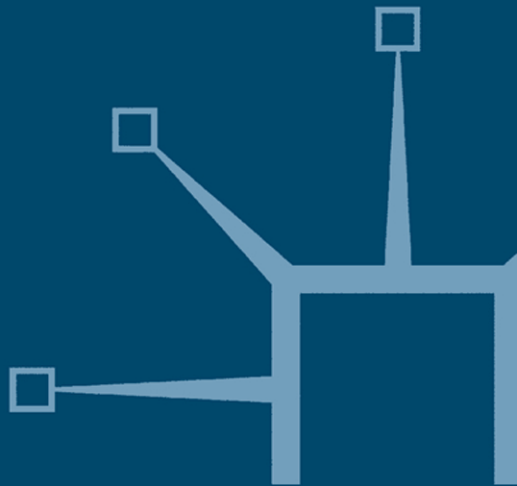


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Visions of Britain, 1730–1830

Anglo-Scottish Writing and Representation

Sebastian Mitchell



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Anglo-Scottish Writing and Representation

Sebastian Mitchell
University of Birmingham, UK

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For Andrew and Rosemary Mitchell

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Introduction

In *The Scarborough Miscellany* of 1732, the Edinburgh poet and bookseller Allan Ramsay included a short address to his son of the same name, who had recently commenced his career as a portraitist in London. The poem begins by praising the 'Young Painter' for the vividness of his style and the mimetic precision and conviction of his account of his sitter, 'so for thy Labour, well design'd,/ May all thy outward Form display'. Ramsay the elder was exceptionally supportive of his son and enduringly proud of his achievements as an artist, but the central purpose of this address was to assert the claims of literature, and poetry in particular, above those of the visual arts, such that painting could not satisfactorily and convincingly reveal a sense of inner being; 'Pencils', he states bluntly, 'Cannot paint the Mind'; they cannot illuminate the subject with such a searching light as to be able to display comprehensively 'his Courage, Learning, and his Wit'.¹ It is perfectly possible to argue against the prior claims of literature for personal insight and exposure on both general and specific grounds: that painting as a representative medium is no less capable of complex personal revelation than its literary counterpart; and that the case can also be made for examples of Ramsay's portraiture (including his self and family portraiture) being exceptionally revealing in these respects. Yet it should also be acknowledged that beyond the absolute capabilities of expressiveness, it would, on occasion, be in the interests of a society portraitist like Ramsay, dependent on his clients' approval for his income, not to reveal, but rather to disguise, what he detected as the defining characteristics of his sitters.

Even if we were to set aside the practical difficulties and demands of commercial portraiture, the apparent opposition of father as poet and son as artist is still not as straightforward as it first appears. As Iain Gordon Brown observed in the later part of the twentieth century,

Ramsay the elder enjoyed close relationships with a number of prominent Scottish artists (including John Smibert, who produced in 1720 the memorable portrait of the poet in cavalier pose, complete with such unmistakable national emblems as a swathe of plaid across his jacket and a badge of St Andrew's cross pinned onto his rakish bonnet); and he had, moreover, as a young man entertained the idea of pursuing a career as a painter rather than a poet. Ramsay the younger became one of the most successful British portraitists in the middle part of the eighteenth century, but he spent much of his adult life wanting to be taken seriously as an author, producing poetry in his youth, then a sequence of topical and antiquarian essays and treatises in middle age, before finally returning to verse not long before his death.²

Ramsay father and son, then, provide a striking generational example of the opposing claims of art and literature, with also a sense of the overlap of these activities. One further aspect of their respective artistic practices is also worth noting here, and that is the national affiliations of their work. As Smibert's portrait suggests, Ramsay the elder held robust independent views, which on occasion could be understood as a commitment to the principles of Scottish Jacobitism. Ramsay the younger, by way of contrast, became in the 1760s the official court painter to George III. He believed in the inherent rightness of the Act of Union, because it provided a secure footing for an economically productive and expansionist state, and he did not regard the assimilation of Scotsmen to English standards of conduct as a necessary concession for the advocacy of pan-British patriotism; if anything, the eighteenth-century British dispensation should have had the opposite effect of providing a suitable set of political and institutional circumstances for the preservation of distinctive Scottishness within the united kingdom.³

Between them, the Ramsays indicate the central concerns of this study as an inquiry into the relationship of literature to art, of text to image, for the purposes of representing the united kingdom in the century shortly after the formation of the British state in 1707. The short verse address of Ramsay elder to Ramsay younger in *The Scarborough Miscellany* is a matter of the effective means of depicting selfhood, and one theme of this discussion is the ways in which national representation in creative works often involves accommodating a particular view of a self in both literary and visual culture within a given national formulation. Sometimes this is a matter of splitting the self into subject and object, and then trying to constitute national experience in the opposition of these terms; sometimes it is a matter of producing an apparently coherent national conspectus in an energetic literary form,

and then undermining this apparently confident public expression by introducing a less than flattering self-portrait into the projection; sometimes it is a matter of constituting oneself as though one served as an extensive national allegory in which one could equate a semblance of psychological balance, should such a state ever be attainable, with the attempt to bring the various conflicting political, social and institutional aspects of modern Britain into an appropriately proportionate relationship. And in the case of the younger Ramsay, as we will see, it would be a matter of applying some abstract principles to the depiction of his well-heeled clientele in order to fashion a correspondence of pan-British portraiture and pan-British patriotism.

If we were to consider the scope of critical historical writing on Scottish literature from the twentieth century onwards, and if we were to set aside the exceptional difficulty of such an undertaking, then we might begin by making a distinction between those studies which are presented as disinterested surveys of the literature produced by Scottish writers both within and without Scotland itself, with no particular interest in recovering or defining the distinctive common national features (Kurt Wittig makes just this claim for detached descriptiveness at the beginning of his *The Scottish Tradition of Literature* in 1958); and those studies, on the other side of this divide, which seek to analyse the varied forms of Scottish writing with equal learning, conviction and rigour, but for the purposes of identifying the defining national features of literary composition, either within a given period or on a trans-historical basis. If we were to trace along the second branch of this divide, then we might consider such notable examples as G. Gregory Smith's early promotion of the notion of Caledonian antisyzygy, with its distinctive zigzag of contradictory impulses as a dominant cultural characteristic, a view which was assimilated alongside European and Russian models of avant-garde poetry by Hugh MacDiarmid to produce his Scottish modernist verse of the 1920s and 1930s, a means of both revealing and imaginatively overcoming the wearying deracinated circumstances he detected in early twentieth-century Scotland, a state he memorably termed 'the Scots aboulia'. In the second half of the twentieth century, David Craig set out to combine a sociological account of the production of Scottish literary types with an intuitive Leavisite appreciation of the subtle interplay of content and form. By the mid-1960s, David Daiches was recasting Caledonian antisyzygy as paradox to propose that while Scottish culture and literary writing after 1707 retained a residual sense of purposefulness, their distinctiveness had been progressively eroded by Anglicised modes of thought and expression. Kenneth Simpson

gave Daiches' thesis fresh impetus in the late 1980s by arguing that the hallmarks of eighteenth-century Scottish writers were their inherent restlessness and protean capacity for invention and adaptability. In the 1990s, Robert Crawford stood MacDiarmid's provincial subservience on its head to maintain that Scotland's marginal status had turned it into an archetypal dissenting province, the combination of whose independent intellectual tradition and the heterodoxy of whose creative output shaped literary standards in both England and the British colonies. And Murray Pittock in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has revealed the rich profusion of Jacobite literary culture as the bearer of national alterity; and he has more recently considered the means by which a distinctive corpus of Irish and Scottish Romantic writing could be recovered from the hegemonic influence of Romantic studies, which has unreflectively positioned an English canon at its centre.⁴

The more dogmatic of nationalist observers active in the early and middle part of the twentieth century, such as MacDiarmid, did not attribute any intrinsic value to the term Britishness, other than as a description of the illegitimate policy of offshore imperialism or as a straightforward synonym for English cultural dominion within the United Kingdom. All serious modern cultural commentators of an independent persuasion have, however, adopted a more nuanced and pliant approach to the term as a historical phenomenon. Yet by the same token, if the principal objective of a study should be to examine and explain the Scottish distinctiveness of a body of writing or a set of paintings, then it is probable that the notion of Britishness will remain at best a secondary consideration, either as a cultural body against which particular artefacts or a tradition of expression need to be defined, or as a kind of generalised condition from which individual Scottish threads need to be unpicked.

There is, of course, an opposing modern tradition of considering such domestic national concerns in which the central purpose is to recount or explain common British standards, or even to celebrate them. Such studies in this other tradition are widely indebted to four-nations history of the later part of the twentieth century (that is, broadly, the body of modern historiography which has considered the United Kingdom from the point of view of a dynamic flux in the relationships of the constituent parts of the British archipelago); and the most prominent and influential contribution to this particular school of integrationist historiography was Linda Colley's view of a nation forged in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It was, she argues, the collective transcendence of regional and provincial loyalties which resulted in the formation of a robust Protestant British state, defined for most of the

period against both the real and imagined threats of Catholic Bourbon France.⁵

In terms of the specific analysis of Anglo-Scottish literary writing of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produced from the 1990s onwards, we can consider the field of study as having two distinct phases. The first is substantially constituted by the works of Leith Davis and Janet Sorensen, who follow Colley in assigning an endpoint in the affirmation of a confident Victorian notion of Britishness, but substantially substitute the figure of transcendence with that of negotiation; they set out to trace the ongoing inter-textual relationship between the works of both Scottish and English writers in the period which move towards a consensus of cultural, literary and linguistic standards. The second phase is exemplified by the discussions of Evan Gottlieb and Juliet Shields in the first decade of the twenty-first century. These critics contend that nation formation in the literary sphere in the period is significantly dependent on Scottish Enlightenment theories of sympathy, such that the sentimental becomes the ideological basis and the practical means of constructing the embracing national conspectus. All these critics indicate exceptions to the general patterns of their arguments, and they are all aware of contending arguments, but they all nevertheless retain the bold teleological aspect of Colley's initial thesis; and they also cleave to the paradigmatic formulation of her study, that in terms of cultural production for the purposes of the development of a common nationality, even allowing for various qualifications, they all still seek to explain nation formation in terms of a single master trope: transcendence in the case of Colley becomes negotiation for Davis and Sorenson, and fellow feeling for Gottlieb and Shields.⁶

There have been, of course, studies which have attempted to preserve the distinctive characteristics of both Britishness and Scottishness (Susan Manning's work on the influence of Scottish-British literature on American writing would be a case in point).⁷ In this book I mainly follow the second tradition of domestic integration, while preserving some of the residual scepticism over the terms of Britishness from the first tradition of cultural nationalism. As the title indicates, I have approached the central topic of Anglo-Scottish writing and representation through the notion of vision, as a particular focus on the pictorial qualities of the works under consideration, and as a means of examining how such images are used specifically and generally, personally and publicly, favourably and unfavourably to project the nation in both accord and discord. The term 'vision' is used in this book across the range of its conventional meanings, from the notion of something seen by means

other than sight, and especially something which possesses a prophetic character, through the sense of something apprehended as a distinct and vivid concept, to the sense of the term closest to its Latin root, the converse of its main meaning in English; that is, of something which is actually seen, perceived directly with the eyes. National vision in the abstracted and prophetic sense would be a significant aspect of the aesthetic programme of James Thomson's poetry in the first half of the eighteenth century. James Boswell in the second half of the century provides a telling example of something actually seen, when he looks around the surrounding countryside and then considers in his journal the national implications of this particular view. 'Vision' also indicates the concern of this book with visual culture and its relationship to the literary. The term is used variously in the examination of the concrete examples of a material collaboration of Scottish poet and English artist, which results in a revolutionary British seascape; as a means of tracing the direct and indirect influence of distinctive Celtic epic expression on British art in this period; as a way of considering the anti-Scottish graphic satire of the early 1760s; and as a means of demonstrating the ways in which writing and painting mutually reinforced one another for a defensive perspective on the united kingdom.

I start from the position that it is possible to accord a positive aesthetic value and content to British art and literature. Colley interestingly began her own landmark *Britons* (1992) by quoting from James Thomson's full-throated patriotic anthem 'Rule Britannia', including the choric insistence that 'Britons never will be slaves'. She notes, among other things, the evident lack of subtlety of this address and the negative nature of this particular claim, as it stresses not what characteristics Britons might have in common, but the fact that they are not, and never will be, collectively enslaved.⁸ The extract is used metonymically in her study to indicate the topic of the subsequent discussion, and as an opening gambit to pose some salient questions about the nature of Britishness and patriotism, but it is still pretty unfair on Thomson himself. In his major poems, Thomson formulates and projects an integrative and extensive national ideology with both internal and offshore components. His longer poems provide this national imagining with immediacy, vivacity and complexity, but what is especially interesting about his writings is the way in which the national prospect is constantly subjected to extensive artistic pressure, such that its integrative ideology can often seem to be on the point of unravelling at the very moment of its being constituted. Art, even of the most jingoistic kind, leads to history as an authoritative discourse for Colley and her

successors, but my intention here is somewhat different in maintaining the imaginative and representative as the central consideration. This is not to say that there is not a sustained engagement in what follows with the social, political and economic history of the united kingdom of the period, but it is to say that the principal interest of the study remains the refraction of such historical processes through the creative image; the analysis proceeds from the premise that the imaginative work cannot be entirely accounted for by the material circumstances of its composition, and that such artwork should not, moreover, be evaluated exclusively for the extent to which it manifests specific historical and social forms.

The book is arranged chronologically as a sequence of interconnected set pieces. Each of its six chapters focuses on a major Anglo-Scottish writer or artist, or a body of work and its transformation from one medium to another. Chapter 1 considers Thomson's vision of Britain in three major poems and the consequences, in particular, of national representation in the introduction of a revealing self-portrait in his final work, *The Castle of Indolence* (1748). Chapter 2 examines Tobias Smollett's vivid and varied depictions of the nation in a selection of his prose fiction, verse, dramatic writing and journalism; it suggests that Smollett frequently constructed the national image in terms of dialectic (a notion of internal self dynamically opposed to an external national entity). In Chapter 3, I consider Ramsay's British portraiture and its relationship to David Hume's sceptical empiricism and common moral-sense philosophy, as well as to the painter's own topical writings. Chapter 4 traces the influence of James Macpherson's translations of Ossian on British visual culture. Chapter 5 surveys the depiction of both domestic relations and the self in James Boswell's journals (and considers the national implications of Boswell's relationship with his father, a much less harmonious state of affairs than that of the Ramsays). And the final chapter has at its centre an example of Anglo-Scottish collaboration with the illustrations by J.M.W. Turner (an artist who proclaimed his own sense of English patriotism by adopting the same birthday as Shakespeare) for the Magnum Opus edition of Sir Walter Scott's verse. The study concludes with a discussion of one of Turner's notable seascapes, which arose directly out of this collaborative project. In terms of method, there is a fair amount of detailed analysis of individual works in this study; and where I have deemed it appropriate I have employed conceptual models for the purposes of illuminating either a body of work or individual texts. The account of Smollett, for example, is informed by the neo-Hegelianism of Lukács' early *Theory of the Novel*

(1920); there is a brief turn to post-modern accounts of authentic experience at the start of the chapter on Ossian; and there is an engagement with post-structuralist approaches to text and speech in the closing part of the discussion of Boswell.

As I mentioned earlier, there has been a tendency in the modern analysis of Anglo-Scottish writing to attempt to explain the common national features of the works under inspection in terms of a single, masterful paradigmatic insight, whether this is on the basis of transcendence, negotiation or sensibility. All of these approaches seem pertinent and revealing as to the national characteristics of the examined works; but as this study will suggest, all three tropes (and some others) are necessary to provide a full account of the domestic national facets of works of literature and art in this period. In some instances, the exceptions can appear more compelling than the general rule. It can be difficult, for example, to argue for a programme of inter-textual conciliation on the basis of writers who had little personal contact, and whose works favour invective and recrimination when considering one another. Smollett has recently been treated as a sentimental writer; when he is not being a sentimentalist, he is expounding on current liberal economic theorems. I contend in this study that he maintains an equally sceptical stance concerning conceptual sensibility and the monetary and trade policies of leading Scottish intellectuals. Paradigmatic approaches to Britishness, moreover, are problematic when applied to certain kinds of creative work. The transcendence of local loyalties is clearly a significant aspect of Thomson's nationalism considered in the opening chapter and of Turner's in the closing one; but in the former case, transcendence is not a neutral process which leaves those items being transcended unaffected (Thomson's republican Whig thesis necessitates the wholesale dispensing of Scottish independent history); and in the latter case, Turner's national transcendence takes place in terms of available aesthetic categories and has an explicit internal referent, not an external oppositional one. It is certainly true that the most successful imagining of inclusive Britishness in the later part of the eighteenth century, Benjamin West's epic painting *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770; considered in the closing section of the discussion of Ossian and art), depends on the commonality of feeling and gaze for its sense of inclusive and reassuring patriotism; but it can only convincingly produce such a warm, encompassing manifold by projecting its harmonious national vision beyond the shores of the Kingdom of Britain itself.

I also suggest here that many of the more interesting personal and national depictions of the period are remarkable for their delicacy,

intricacy and complexity; nevertheless, the flip side of such appealing fragility is another element which should be set alongside the more familiar approaches and that is the use of violence for the purposes of envisioning the united kingdom. It is certainly not possible, in my view, to consider Smollett's writings on Britain, both domestically and internationally, without addressing this aspect of his compositions. The relationship of literature to violence is not straightforward, and I consider some of the ways one might set about conceptualising it in the second chapter. The particular problem with Smollett, however, is that his depictions of cruelty are not merely used for documentary and oppositional purposes, but seem to convey within them a certain pleasure in the recounting of pain and suffering, the taking of a dark delight in the spectacle of torment. This interest in violence, which has both subjective and national aspects, reappears in other parts of this study; it is apparent, for instance, in Boswell's compulsion both to witness and to recoil from public executions; and, as I argue in the third chapter, the refinement of Ramsay's cosmopolitan portraiture, with its exquisitely thin application of paint, is ultimately best understood as being the opposite side of the same coin, the obverse of the savage measures he advocates for recalcitrant colonists and other socially destabilising elements closer to home.

As an antidote to such dispiriting material, I have attempted to preserve a sense of pleasurable wonder which many of the objects considered in this study are capable of producing. I mean both the sense of wonder of their initial audience, such as experienced by the spectators who stood and swooned before West's modern epic history painting at the Royal Academy in 1771, and also the sense of wonder which these artefacts can still produce, such as in the precision and vivid immediacy of Ramsay's best portraiture (as though the sitter has only just turned his or her head in order to catch the observer's eye); or in the compelling page-turning fluency of Boswell's Edinburgh journals from the mid-1770s, written at high speed in his distinctive open hand in a sequence of small, marble-patterned paper-covered notebooks; or in the exceptional detail of the compact topographical watercolours of Scottish towns and cities, which Turner produced at the beginning of the 1830s for the authoritative edition of Scott's poetry, and in the decisive transformation of this minute imagery into a great, billowing, stormy island vision, painted shortly before the Victorian era, with which this book closes. But we begin at some remove from such extremes of pleasurable wonder and dark delight, with an event notable for its sense of easy contentment and conviviality, held on a crisp autumnal Saturday, in the Scottish Borders, at the turn of the twentieth century.

1

Thomson's Vision of Britannia

I

There is an evocative account of James Thomson's bicentenary celebrations at Southdean in the Scottish borders in the *Jedburgh Gazette* of 25 September 1900. The correspondent describes the setting up of the platform, its decoration with flags, and the speeches praising Thomson, as the son of the local minister, as poet of the borders, as a Scottish patriot, and as the celebrator of an expansive pacific Britishness. The brass band, we are told, played stirringly; there were renditions of British and Scottish anthems by the 400-strong audience; and the closing tea was held under the expert superintendence of Mrs J. W. Scott of the Spread Eagle Hotel, Jedburgh.¹

The event was an evident success, but it did also represent just about the last moment when Thomson could plausibly be described as a popular author. His stock had risen steadily from the late eighteenth century until the later part of the nineteenth, by which time he was the most extensively published poet in the United Kingdom and America, with the possible exception of Milton.² There is a well-worn anecdote about Coleridge and Hazlitt finding a shabby copy of Thomson's *The Seasons* on a bench in a West Country alehouse in 1803. Coleridge seized it and exclaimed with possibly only a hint of irony: 'that is true fame'.³ The correspondent of *The Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* affirmed Thomson's widespread appeal in 1842, insisting, rather prematurely as it turned out, that he was 'popular in the best meaning of the word, that is, to be universally read and understood long after all temporary tastes and influences have ceased to act'.⁴ Thomson even inspired cultish adherents. David Steuart Erskine, eleventh Earl of Buchan, erected an obelisk and a classical temple to his

memory, held public celebrations of his birthday at Ednam throughout the 1790s (crowning a copy of *The Seasons* with a laurel wreath on one occasion) and commissioned a memorial tablet to the poet in Richmond Church.⁵ John Evans visited Thomson's former home in Kew-Foot lane, Richmond in July 1822 (for the purposes of compiling a travel guide) and found that the villa had been turned into a kind of incidental shrine, with a steady stream of admirers calling on the off chance of being admitted by the housekeeper.⁶ And in 1867, Thomson's Victorian namesake and fellow London-based Scottish poet James 'B. V.' Thomson improbably claimed his unmarried and childless predecessor as an ancestor: 'as the lineal heir I'm blessed/ With all the property'.⁷

Much of the eighteenth-century criticism had regarded Thomson's poetry as an effective distillation of the author's more appealing attributes. Its heartfelt candour left Patrick Murdoch wondering whether he should 'more admire the *poet*, or love the *man*'. One obituarist observed in 1748 that his works bore witness to the 'Goodness of his Heart, which overflowed with Benevolence, Humanity, universal Charity and every amiable Virtue'; and Tobias Smollett similarly opined that Thomson was 'one of those happy poets, whose writings inspired personal love and esteem'.⁸ In addition to the praise for the perfect encapsulation of a generous personality, there were two significant interpretative positions on his writings in this period. Samuel Johnson thought that the most striking quality of Thomson's poetry was its fine-grained perception, such that the most mundane objects were illuminated in a strikingly original light; Joseph Warton also noticed Thomson's remarkable capacity for visualisation, producing an argument which would run well into the nineteenth century, that the poet was the most imagistic, the most painterly of modern authors, whose vivid and sometimes overwhelming natural descriptions stood comparison with the wild and romantic landscapes of Salvator Rosa. Not all commentators, however, were so well disposed to Thomson.⁹ John Pinkerton objected to his convoluted syntax; Hazlitt did not think that he could string two good ideas together; and in a wholesale dismantling of the terms in which Thomson was usually lauded, the author of some 'Critical Observations' argued that the poetry was much too populist and mechanistic, and the poet too much given to the expression of 'a lofty and complacent sentiment, which plays upon the feelings like the ineffable power of solemn harmony, but has no reference to the quality of our belief, to the dispositions of the heart, or to the habitual tendency of the character'.¹⁰

If one approach to the bicentenary celebrations at Southdene is to regard them as a kind of endpoint of Thomson as popular writer, then

another is to see them as the start of the period of specialist academic study. In the early and middle part of the twentieth century, scholars Herbert Drennon, Marjory Hope Nicholson and Alan McKillop set about detailing the exceptional range of ideas expressed in Thomson's poetry, from Newtonian science to fantastical Portuguese travel writing.¹¹ In the same period, Jean Hagstum challenged Warton's argument on Thomson's romantic modern tendencies by suggesting that the author's own artistic interests were almost exclusively classical, neo-classical and baroque; and James Sambrook produced, as the crowning achievement of the tradition of exacting empirical scholarship on this writer, two standard modern editions of the verse and an authoritative biography.¹² By the later part of the twentieth century, the principal aim of the academic study of Thomson was to historicise his works, to consider them for their immediate political, national and ideological significance. Christine Gerrard, for example, approached Thomson's poetry as though it were a straightforward conduit for the various views and policies of Whig politicians and their clients; Mary Jane Scott argued for the Scottish distinctiveness of Thomson's writings; and John Barrell, in an extensively theorised and conceptually self-aware approach, examined Thomson's verse as an ever-ingenious, subtle and sometimes contradictory endorsement of the dominant ideology of the English land-owning class.¹³

In the eighteenth century, then, the main interest in Thomson was in the personal artistic attributes of his verse; and when the historical and political components became so obvious that they could no longer be ignored, that was the point to lose interest in the works as poetry. It was not merely that Johnson disliked the republicanism of *Liberty*, Thomson's most overtly political poem, it was that the overwhelming presence of politics and history in this work left almost no room for the consideration of anything else. However, by the end of the twentieth century, politics and history had become the central concern of the study of Thomson's poetry, leaving little space for a consideration of such matters as art, image and literary expression. The most interesting aspect of Thomson's verse, as I will suggest in what follows, is situated between these poles, in the examination of the ways in which politics, national allegiances and historical formulations are subjected to considerable artistic and psychological pressure in the course of his writings. Linda Colley, as remarked in the Introduction, uses the example of Thomson's 'Rule Britannia', and its famous refrain about Britons never being slaves, to illustrate her point on the difficulty of finding a national imagery with sufficient imaginative purchase to appeal to all

British subjects. One might add that the same nullifying principles seem to apply to Thomson's anglicising historiography, which conveniently dispenses with any Scottish history prior to the Act of Union, save for the occasional noteworthy exception, such as William Wallace, retained as a plausible opponent to Plantagenet tyranny. It is also the case, however, that Thomson did produce in his verse an inordinate amount of positive British imagery, even if he struggled to maintain imagistic and ideological consistency in his projections of the united kingdom.

We can consider Thomson's poetical national representation in terms of three phases, each associated with one of his major poems. *The Seasons* required the fitting together of domestic and international prospects with observations on notable military and naval campaigns, and recent social and economic policy. Thomson clearly attempted to consider the poem in terms of a set of structuring modes, but the problem was always that the vision of one segment would be undermined by the vision of another; this is most evident in the struggle to maintain the key distinction in the poem between the essentially harmonious and ordered prospect of domestic Britain and the extreme and frequently destructive conditions of the imaginative and amalgamated area he terms the Torrid Zone. Thomson thought *Liberty* his best poem, perhaps because it seemed to him to have resolved some of the more pressing historical and integrative difficulties of *The Seasons* through the introduction of a conceptual model of universal cyclical history. Yet its narrative and especially its dispiriting conclusion also seem to encourage a reading against the grain of its ostensible celebration of progressive Britishness. The problems of the extended treatment of conceptual history in poetical form seem to have been resolved in his final work, *The Castle of Indolence*, by the simple expedient of offering essentially the same case in a more concise form and refashioning it as entertaining Spenserian allegory. The apparent cohesiveness and persuasiveness of the national narrative in this poem, however, was then undermined by Thomson's introduction for the first and last time of a prominent confessional component.

II

Thomson provided an exceptionally wide range of ways of conceiving of objects and experience in *The Seasons*. The central scientific positions in the poem are Newton's, taken directly and indirectly from his gravitational, optical and astronomical writings. The central theological and social perspectives are from Shaftesbury, occasionally combined with

Bacon's pyramid (in which the understanding moves from the particular to higher degrees of generality) and the Great Chain of Being. There are views of country taverns, rolling hills and foxhunting, some moral interludes, modern technological discussions of animal and vegetable husbandry (occasionally merged with Virgil's descriptions from the *Georgics*), extensive imaginative panoramas drawn from recent British and European travel literature, meteorological explanations, and reflections on domestic industry and social reform which have their origins in contemporary pamphlets. When Thomson wished to consider the psychological basis of perception, he generally did so by making a Lockean distinction between primary and secondary qualities. However, just as *The Seasons* is filled with objects and ideas from the universally abstract to the microscopically concrete, so the poem self-reflexively indicates its myriad ways of seeing by providing a whole host of epithets to qualify the eye's optical function in literal and figurative terms, such as 'Reason's Eye' (*Winter*, 1049), 'Sacred Eye' (*Summer*, 916), 'cherish'd Eye' (*Spring*, 89), 'raptur'd Eye' (*Spring*, 111), 'licentious Eye' (*Summer*, 1344), 'creative Eye' (*Autumn*, 1016) and 'microscopic Eye' (*Summer*, 288).¹⁴

Given this poem's conceptual range, it is not surprising that Thomson's consideration of the work's national ideological aspects is intermittent. He discusses Great Britain in each of the seasons, but his most sustained treatment is the national panegyric, which follows the description of the Torrid Zone in *Summer*. He uses a limited number of terms to describe Britain and its constituent parts, and does not explicitly refer to the nation as a 'united kingdom', although he does conclude the account of Scotland in *Autumn* with a periphrastic reformulation of this term (considered in due course). Similarly, he does not employ the terms 'Scotland', 'Scottish', 'Scotsmen' or 'Scots', preferring the Latin 'Caledonia' to introduce the Scottish section. As was standard for domestic national discussions in this period, he pays little attention to Wales (not a kingdom and therefore not worth extended consideration), limiting himself to a few lines on the mountains, Caernarfon, Penmaenmawr and Snowdon, in *Summer* (1161–6). More surprisingly, there is no mention of 'English' or 'Englishman' in the poem, and only a solitary adjectival use of 'England' in an account of the conversation during a feast after a hunt in *Autumn*, where the revellers 'talk the while/ Of ENGLAND'S Glory, ne'er to be defac'd' (506–7). The use of 'England' alongside images of excessive consumption perhaps suggests disapproval at such narrow partisanship. When Thomson considers the domestic nation, he almost always employs the term 'Britain', alongside its cognates of 'Briton' and 'British', and the personification of

'Britannia'. As he explained to close friend and sometime collaborator David Mallet in 1726, he used 'Britannia' precisely because 'it included our native country, Scotland'.¹⁵ In keeping with his Scottish-Whig Presbyterian background, Thomson is a resolute economic integrationist, and believes that the success of the new nation should be founded on widespread prosperity. He makes this position clear in the first mention of 'Britain' in the poem, as part of a description of the remains of a border hill fort:

And now the sprightly Race
 Invites them forth; when swift, the Signal given,
 They start away, and sweep the massy Mound
 That runs around the Hill; the Rampart once
 Of iron War, in ancient barbarous Times,
 When disunited BRITAIN ever bled,
 Lost in eternal Broil: ere yet she grew
 To this deep-laid indissoluble State,
 Where *Wealth* and *Commerce* lifts the golden Head;
 And o'er our Labours, *Liberty* and *Law*,
 Impartial, watch, the Wonder of a World!

(*Spring*, 838–48)

Thomson's indicative anthropomorphic periphrasis, 'sprightly Race', describes the sheepdogs sent to round up sheep grazing around the remains of the iron-age fort. He contrasts the mound's current picturesque circumstances with its original military function, and this fort provides a salient reminder of the long tradition of internal conflict in the British Isles (he probably had in mind the remnant of the fort north of Southdean, which would have a particular suggestion of cross-border hostilities). The current 'deep-laid indissoluble State' has three central components: the settlement of the Glorious Revolution; the Act of Union; and economic enterprise, made possible by freedoms of thought and action (*Liberty*) and the statutory protection afforded to persons and property (*Law*). In this episode the reflection on the pastoral scene leads to an abstract vision of the commercial nation. Elsewhere in *Spring*, the landscape is conceived as a material resource. Thomson follows Virgil in the *Georgics* and urges his fellow 'generous BRITONS [to] venerate the Plow' (67). As Monica Gale has suggested, successful agrarian production can be understood in Virgil's poem both as a celebration of recent Italian unification, and as the necessary condition for the continuing security of the domestic state and empire.¹⁶ Thomson, however, further

stresses the economic advantages of modern agriculture when properly managed, as the episode concludes with a celebration of the export of surplus grain from the recently unified kingdom of Great Britain as ‘th’exhaustless Granary of a World’ (77).

In keeping with the expectations of topographical descriptions of Whig grandees’ estates, the prospect of Stowe in *Autumn* provides both a more formal and a more contemplative national vision. Cobham’s garden combines ordered aesthetic principles and horticultural expertise, so that ‘All-beauteous Nature fears to be outdone’ (1047). In this view, it is the garden’s harmony, rather than the prospect of agricultural efficiency, which best exemplifies British virtue. Thomson demands that his muse should ‘o’er the Garden and the rural Seat/ Preside, which shining thro’ the chearful Land/ In countless Numbers blest BRITANNIA sees;/ O lead me to the wide-extended Walks,/ The fair Majestic Paradise of STOWE’ (1038–42). He subsequently discloses the passage’s political significance when he contemplates the prospective career of William Pitt; and he anticipates that the politician and patriot will eventually be celebrated in Stowe’s Temple of Virtue: ‘There, O PITT,’ he writes, ‘thy Country’s early Boast,/ There let me sit beneath the shelter’d Slopes,/ Or in that *Temple* where, in future Times,/ Thou well shalt merit a distinguish’d Name’ (1048–51). Thomson provides here one of the poem’s more intricate uses of the figure of Britannia, the goddess serving simultaneously as the embodiment of national virtue, the perspective from which Stowe should be observed and the poet’s muse. He first used her for the purposes of national survey and judgement in his early political poem *Britannia* (1729), where she appears bare-breasted and distressed to contemplate the current unsettled national circumstances; in addition to her best-known celebration in the *Masque of Alfred* (1740), she reappears as a calm and consoling presence in the later part of *Liberty* to act as the guide for Liberty herself.

Thomson’s common device for patriotic representation in *The Seasons*, as with praise for Pitt in Stowe, is the embodiment of favourable national characteristics within a given individual. He occasionally enlivens this device with some indirect associations. For instance, he conventionally describes his patron George Bubb, Lord Dodington, in the verse dedication to *Summer* as ‘BRITAIN’S Glory’ (28). This national compliment, however, sets the tone for the account of heavenly mechanics which immediately follows it. After the dedication, Thomson envisions God setting the solar system in motion. In accordance with the predictions of Newtonian science, there are necessary perturbations to account for the gravitational pull, which tugs each planet out of its elliptical orbit,

so that the planet may ripple but still travels along its predetermined curvilinear trajectory. And while gravity must be the basis of all celestial motion, it remains a divine mystery, such that it must still be God's ever-presence which maintains this absolute and perfect equilibrium; it is, ultimately, His 'ALL-PERFECT HAND,/ That pois'd, impels, and rules the steady Whole' (41–2).¹⁷ Thomson had explicitly considered the national aspects of celestial phenomena in his earlier *Poem Sacred to the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton* (1727). While celebrating Newton's astronomical discoveries, he unashamedly describes there the natural philosopher as 'BRITAIN'S boast' (190); and affirms the triumph of coherent domestic empiricism over loose continental rationalism by suggesting that he had 'from the wild domain/ of the *French Dreamer* [i.e. Descartes] rescu'd Heaven and Earth' (83–4).¹⁸ The implication remains in *The Seasons* that while Newton's discoveries clearly have universal application, they were only made possible by favourable domestic national circumstances.

The clearest embodiment of such national characteristics lies in the two pageants of worthies in the poem. In the 1730 version, Thomson surveyed 14 Anglo-British historical figures in *Summer*, including Walsingham, Drake, Sidney and Bacon, and 13 ancient worthies in *Winter*, with Milton as the sole modern. He lengthened both pageants in the significantly revised version of 1744 (to 20 British worthies and 26 ancients). In the account of the ancients (in both versions) Thomson again explicitly introduces himself into the text, this time as the epic poet who will 'hold high Converse with the MIGHTY DEAD' (*Winter*, 432). The parade itself is a demonstration of the classical origins of modern Whiggism, with all the figures celebrated either for public service to the state or for their strict observance of republican principles in adverse personal circumstances. It begins with Socrates, 'Who firmly good in a corrupted State,/ Against the Rage of Tyrants *single* stood' (440–41); the Athenian statesman Solon is praised for constructing enlightened civic institutions when he 'built his Common-Weal/ On Equity's wide base; by *tender* Laws' (446–7); and the Corinthian Timoleon both deposes his usurping sibling and mourns his loss, 'who wept the *Brother* while the *Tyrant* bled' (475; an action which drew comparisons with the more recent conduct of William III).¹⁹ In the Roman section, Thomson praises Cicero's ultimately unsuccessful defence of republican ideals, 'whose powerful Eloquence a while/ Restrain'd the *rapid* Fate of rushing ROME' (521–2), and reflects on Brutus's more ambivalent example. He dispenses with the chronology in the pageant's final part, as Homer, Virgil and Milton all enter together: 'Great HOMER too appears, of daring Wing,/ *Parent* of Song! And *equal* by his Side,/ The BRITISH MUSE; join'd