

KIRSTEN CARTER MCKEE

THE GENIUS LOCI OF THE ATHENS OF THE NORTH:
THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF EDINBURGH'S
CALTON HILL

At the eastern end of the Edinburgh World Heritage Site, the small protrusion of volcanic rock known as Calton Hill sits at the point where the Old and New Towns of Edinburgh meet. This area developed from an area for grazing and tilling to a burial ground and site for the city's prisons in the eighteenth century, before it joined with lands to the north in the early nineteenth century to become part of the proposed development for Edinburgh's Third New Town. This paper considers how the landscape of the Third New Town can provide a better understanding of the cultural significance of Calton Hill, and the structures placed upon its summit. It is argued that by considering these two elements together, further commentary can be gleaned on Scottish identity – and in particular how this identity was understood and portrayed within the British state during the nineteenth century.

Calton Hill's overtly classical Greek rhetoric found in many of its structures and monuments is suggestive in its dominant presence within this landscape, yet its existence on the site is often dismissed as a prevailing taste in nineteenth-century Edinburgh society for the Greek style rather than as a cultural manifestation of any broader contemporaneous dialogue. In particular, Calton Hill's association with the sobriquet that 'Edinburgh is the Athens of the North' is one that is often repeated without ever providing further substantive explanation as to its meaning in the context of the hill or how this might have come into common discourse.

The landscape's transition from an agrarian periphery into an urban development, which celebrated notables from the golden age of the Scottish Enlightenment alongside the martyrs of the Napoleonic wars, stimulated wide-scale interest within the Scottish intelligentsia of the early nineteenth century, who fervently debated the form and resonance of the site and what it represented to nineteenth-century society. This paper considers how the landscape of the Third New Town – when considered alongside the resonance of the Neo-Greek architectural style – can provide a better understanding of the cultural significance of Calton Hill, and the structures placed upon its summit. It is argued that by considering these two elements together, further commentary can be gleaned on Scottish identity – and in particular how this identity was understood and portrayed within the British state during the nineteenth century.

PROPOSED THIRD NEW TOWN

The 'Third New Town of Edinburgh' was the final and never completed phase of Edinburgh's Georgian expansion. This was proposed at the beginning of the 1800s, but

*The Mackintosh School of Architecture, Glasgow School of Art, 167 Renfrew Street, Glasgow G3 6RQ, UK
Email: K.McKee@gsa.ac.uk*

did not begin to be developed until the 1820s. This extended from the eastern extremity of the first phase, adjacent to Robert Adam's Register House, stretching north to the town of Leith on the Firth of Forth, approximately a mile away from the city limits. Proposals for this site reflect the sentiments found in many of the urban developments that occurred throughout the British Isles during this period. The Revolution in France and the subsequent Napoleonic wars had enflamed concerns that Britain needed to defend its shores from invasion by the French and protect against insurgence by those who sympathized with the French cause. This was coupled with an increase in imperial trade links to the British colonies, all of which called for the need to bolster national vigour, so that Britain continued to maintain political equilibrium during wartime, while facilitating the potential for further economic prosperity.

Urban expansion throughout the British Isles responded to this need through the enlargement and strengthening of ports throughout the country, providing space for the winter docking of a large shipping fleet that would protect both home soil and assist overseas trade. In addition, direct access routes to major ports from major urban centres were developed, along which were placed institutional buildings and commemorative monuments at key viewpoints. This not only allowed for quick access and better trade links between the ports and major urban centres, but also served as a reminder of the upholders and protectors of the country's values through the immortalization of the great and the good of the British state.

Before the development of Leith Walk, access between Edinburgh and Leith had traditionally taken two routes: either through the Canongate, up through Abbeyhill and onto Easter Road, or through Broughton Village to Leith Mills on the western side of the town.¹ By the time that the docks were being developed, the direct access between Edinburgh and the Port at Leith that was afforded by Leith Walk meant that it, along with Easter Road, were considered to be primary connecting routes between these two urban areas and the key to Edinburgh's establishment as a port town. It is, therefore, while the upgrading for these two main access routes was being outlined that the area between these two streets was considered for development as a way to finance the whole project without having to depend too heavily on local or state funding for its execution.

THE DESIGN COMPETITION

An open competition to find an appropriate design for this site, which included the open common land of Calton Hill, was held in late 1812. This area was (and still is) owned by the city, as well as private landowners. However, despite nearly forty-five different submissions, no overall winner could be decided upon. The committee decided that the prize money should be shared out between four proposals that were considered to have interesting and preferential parts to their designs, but which were not overall wholly acceptable as a plan for the area. The first prize of three hundred pounds should be shared by William Reid, Alexander Nasmyth and Richard Crichton and the one hundred pound second prize should go to a jointly submitted plan by James Milne and Benjamin Bell.²

The most influential component of the competition turned out not to be the designs produced by the competition entrants, but the comments made on the entries by one of the judges, the architect William Stark.³ Stark compiled a report on the competition entries that included general details on the considerations that should be made in any proposals for the development of the site, but, in particular, the treatment of Calton Hill by commenting on the assets of the existing landscape and how it should (or should not) be developed. Its contents were considered so insightful that it became highly influential

in the layout of the site, despite Stark's untimely death before his report was even completed. The committee, therefore, disregarded all of the submitted competition plans and instead used Stark's ideas as a basis for the site alongside their own ambitions to commission the up-and-coming architect William Henry Playfair to provide a completely new set of proposals for the development.

WILLIAM PLAYFAIR'S PROPOSALS

Playfair's 1819 report was published along with a detailed plan and comments on the overall proposals for the whole site.⁴ By focusing on the views, amenities, convenience and gravity that this plan would provide for the city, Playfair defined his vision for the site in a manner similar to that expressed by Stark in his 1813 report (he had, after all, been Stark's apprentice at the time of his death.) As Stark had suggested, Calton Hill was no longer considered for heavy urban development. Instead, this area was to become an 'urban pleasure ground' with commemorative statues, monuments and busts, which would be glimpsed from afar through enclosed vistas as one approached the city from the port of Leith. The inclusion of these enclosed vistas, which focused on commemorative structure and the placement within the scheme for national institutional structures, was similar to the contemporaneous project also being planned by John Nash for London's Regent's Park and Regent's Street.

By exploring the language used by Nash in his reports for the Regent's Street site, the purpose and theories behind his design, and the design itself, it appears that by the time of Playfair's proposals, both developments were laid out in order to use ideas of the picturesque in a manner that would provide a constant reminder of the city, the state and the monarch while traversing the urban townscape.⁵ In other words, just as Nash was redefining London as the first city of empire, Playfair was also creating Edinburgh as a northern imperial metropolis. The similarities between the ambitions of these two designs can be clearly identified in engravings of the period, which show the London view down Regent's Street from Carlton House, compared with the Edinburgh engraving of a second, new carriage road to London that would leave the city from the east.⁶ This road had been originally proposed by Robert Adam in the 1780s, but was not developed until the 1810s, when Robert Stevenson, engineer, and Archibald Elliot, architect, built a bridge to connect the First New Town to Calton Hill.

While designing the layout of Calton Hill and the lands to the north, Playfair also took into account the ambitions of the committee who commissioned the designs to ensure that his plan would emphasize the route into the city from the north. This route between Leith and Edinburgh (Leith Walk) is described as a 'magnificent approach, [...] and [...] the great line of communication between the two cities'.⁷ Playfair did this by designing vistas from and to the new 'main' proposed thoroughfare of Leith Walk throughout his urban plan, with many streets beginning and ending with striking commemorative monuments, gardens and other picturesque entities.

In particular, he suggested that at the centre of this majestic thoroughfare, a large crescent was to have at its centre, 'the proposed National Monument intended to commemorate the victory at Waterloo', further augmenting the significance of this thoroughfare to the port and creating a new central focal point for the city.⁸ This structure was not placed on Leith Walk, but instead is now to be found unfinished on the summit of Calton Hill, and was intended as a memorial to the Scottish war dead who fell in the Napoleonic Wars of 1803–15. Its inception had come about from a reaction to the establishment of a government fund for a London monument to commemorate those who had fought in the Napoleonic campaigns. After a discussion in Parliament that

Scotland and Ireland's contribution to the collective British victory of the Napoleonic wars should also be recognized and celebrated, proposals began to consider the form and location that a memorial celebrating the contribution of those nations within Britain should hold.

A NATIONAL MONUMENT AND SCOTTISH IDENTITY

In Edinburgh, this had been initially conceived as a triumphal arch, which was to be located on the new entranceway into the city on the south side of Calton Hill,⁹ called at that time London Road, but now known as Regent's Road. However, the reluctance of the government to finance the construction of this memorial in Edinburgh shifted the venture to one of public subscription, which broadened the debate of the overall purpose and nature of the structure. This quickly extended the vision for the monument to serve not only as a memorial to the fallen of the Napoleonic Wars, but also as a national church, which would act as a pantheon to heroes of Scottish history. It therefore would celebrate not only British successes of the Napoleonic Campaigns, but also the Scottish successes in British society – emphasizing the contribution made by Scots to both the recent successes of the Napoleonic Wars, as well as the emerging British Empire as a whole.

The stylistic choice for the design of this monument was therefore important in projecting this message to the rest of Britain and beyond. Neo-Gothic, neo-Roman Italianate and Neoclassical designs were all proposed, but the committee set up to oversee the construction of the national monument believed that it should replicate 'one of the most prominent buildings from Classical Antiquity'.¹⁰ This left two choices of building large enough to accommodate a congregation befitting of a national church: the Pantheon of Rome or the Parthenon of Athens. Comparisons between Edinburgh and Athens had been in common discourse from the latter half of the eighteenth century. One of the earliest known comparisons is from a comment made by the artist Allan Ramsay in 1762 to Sir William Dick of Prestonfield in which he states that the development of the riding school in the city will serve the cultured gentlemen of the university well:

The setting up of further learned institutions such as a Riding school will render Edinburgh the 'Athens of Britain' where instead of the monkish pedantry of the old-fashioned Universities, young gentlemen will be initiated in the principles of useful knowledge and liberal accomplishments which qualify a man to appear in the distinguished spheres of life.¹¹

Although this relationship between the advances of the intellectual community of the Scottish Enlightenment and that of ancient Athens is a comparison that has continued to perpetuate from this period onwards, comparison between the topography of Edinburgh and Athens did not come into common use until the early nineteenth century. Geographical similarities were first noted by Cambridge geologist Edward Daniel Clarke in his 1818 publication, where it was stated that 'Edinburgh exhibits a very correct model of a Grecian city and with its Acropolis, Town, and Harbour, it bears some resemblance to Athens and the Piraeus',¹² and was further emphasized in Alexander Nasmyth's 1822 view of Edinburgh,¹³ the composition of which was based on Hugh William Williams's view of Athens from 1816.¹⁴ In fact, according to Lord Henry Cockburn, it was during the period of the development of the Third New Town when this idea of Edinburgh as Athens was fully cemented:

It was about the time that the foolish phrase 'The Modern Athens', began to be applied to the capital of Scotland; a sarcasm, or a piece of affected flattery, when used in a moral sense; but just enough if it meant only a comparison of the physical features of the two

places. The opportunities of observing, and the practice of talking of, foreign buildings in reference to our own, directed our attention to the works of internal taste, and roused our ambition.¹⁵

Despite detailed proposals for a Pantheon design being outlined in 1819, the committee for the national monument settled on the Grecian Parthenon, the reasons being as follows. Firstly, the interest in Grecian architecture that derived from James Stuart and Nicholas Revett's *Antiquities of Athens* (1762) in the eighteenth century had been reinforced by the arrival of the Parthenon Marbles in the early nineteenth century. It is no coincidence that the same Lord Elgin who 'stole' the marbles from the Parthenon was the leading man behind the campaign for the monument to take the form of a facsimile of the Parthenon. Elgin also invited the architect Charles Cockerell to Edinburgh before the committee had even made their final decision on the form that the monument would take. Secondly, the assimilation between the wars of ancient Greece with the Napoleonic campaigns provided further justification for British actions abroad and the future plans for the empire. And thirdly, and most significantly in the context of this paper, in building a facsimile of the Parthenon as the Scottish National Monument and emphasizing the role that 'little' states, such as Athens, contributed to the glory of ancient Greece, Edinburgh was placed in a similar role in the Scottish Enlightenment.

This not only emphasized Edinburgh's specific contribution to this period, but also created a reference point to place Scottish identity within the British Empire – while ancient Greece paved the way for ancient Rome in terms of cultural and intellectual contributions, the contribution of Enlightenment Edinburgh was painted as the foundations of the success of Imperial London. This comparison between the golden age of the Scottish Enlightenment and the golden age of ancient Athens allowed Edinburgh to claim a role as the 'civilizing influence within Great Britain and the Empire'.¹⁶ In using cultural assimilation through architectural allegory in building a copy of the Parthenon, this provided a non-threatening commentary of the role that Scotland played in defining the construct of the British state in the early nineteenth century.

In placing a national monument within what was ostensibly an imperial urban landscape it physically and symbolically placed Scotland's identity within the landscape of empire. Although both Clarke's description and Nasmyth's painting had compared the Athenian Acropolis with the summit of the old town ridge that seats Edinburgh Castle, by locating the national monument on the summit of Calton Hill – rather than halfway down Leith walk, as suggested in the original proposed layout – a new 'Acropolis in the city' would be defined on the summit of Calton Hill and the connection between Edinburgh and the port of Leith as the new Athens and Piraeus would be further strengthened.

This plan, however, was never fully realized, and with less than a third of the layout completed, it was abandoned by the mid-nineteenth century, partly due to the placement of the railway lines running east-west, which bisected the site through its centre. This 'cauterizing' of Playfair's proposed landscape can still be traced in the current urban footprint, with some elements of the Neoclassical plan still particularly evident directly north of Calton Hill. Nonetheless, the resonance of Playfair's proposals are still significant in understanding Edinburgh's own perception of its role within the British political state during the early part of the nineteenth century. By expanding the city in a manner that would allow it to become a port town, Edinburgh was establishing itself as a stronghold of empire and a key defender of the North Sea coast of the British Isles. In Edinburgh's eyes, this not only legitimized the role of the Scots nation in the protection of the British state, but also, by bathing itself in the celestial light of the Greek allegorical idiom of the nineteenth century, it allowed Scots to retain a separate cultural identity from their

English neighbours in a manner that would not be considered a threat to the overall construct of the Union and particularly the ambitions of state and empire.

REFERENCES

- ¹ The line of the road was created during the threat of invasion from Oliver Cromwell in July 1650, when General David Leslie had ordered two deep defensive trenches to be dug from Calton Hill to Leith Walk for the protection of the city. It is argued that the walk was built on top of the trenches, but evidence has been found that the level of the walk was much lower than that of the present; Leith Walk Research Group, *Leith Walk and Greenside: A Social History* (Edinburgh: The Group, 1979).
- ² This would mean that all 'winners' received one hundred pounds apiece. These designs are discussed in detail, and the images are reproduced in Peter Reed, 'Form and context: a study of Georgian Edinburgh', in Thomas A. Markus (ed.), *Order in Society and Space: Architectural Form and its Context in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1982); and Connie Byrom, *The Edinburgh New Town Gardens: 'Blessings as Well as Beauties'* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2005).
- ³ Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840*, 4th edn (London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 977.
- ⁴ William Playfair, *Report to the Right Honorable the Lord Provost, Magistrates and Council of the City of Edinburgh, Etc* (Edinburgh, 1819). Playfair produced two reports, one in April and one in December 1819.
- ⁵ John Nash, *1st Report to H.M. Commissioners of Woods, Forests and Land Revenues* (London, 1809).
- ⁶ Cf. W. Tombleton after Thomas Shepherd, *Waterloo Place, London* (n.d.), in John Summerson, *John Nash: Architect to King George IV* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1949), with W. Tombleton after Thomas Shepherd, *Waterloo Place, The National & Nelson's Monument, Calton Hill &c. Edinburgh*, in T. Shepherd, *Modern Athens Displayed in a series of views: or Edinburgh in the nineteenth century: exhibiting the whole of the new buildings, modern improvements, antiquities, and picturesque scenery, of the Scottish metropolis and its environs* (London: Jones & Co., 1829).
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ⁸ Playfair, *Report to the Right Honourable*.
- ⁹ As seen on James Kirkwood, *Plan and Elevation of the New Town of Edinburgh* (1819), detail showing the proposed National Monument; National Library of Scotland.
- ¹⁰ M. Linning, *Memoranda Publica* (Edinburgh, 1834).
- ¹¹ Allan Ramsay to Sir William Dick of Prestonfield, 1762; from John Lowrey, 'From Caesarea to Athens: Greek Revival Edinburgh and the question of Scottish identity within the unionist state', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 60/2 (2001), n. 1.
- ¹² Edward Daniel Clarke, *Travels in Various Countries of Europe, Asia and Africa*, Vol. 6 (London, 1818), p. 378.
- ¹³ Alexander Nasmyth, *View of the City of Edinburgh* (1822), oil on canvas, Yale Centre for British Art.
- ¹⁴ Hugh William Williams, *View of Athens* (c.1818), oil on canvas, Bridgeman Art Library.
- ¹⁵ Henry Cockburn, *Memorials of His Time* (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1856). *The Ordinance Gazetteer of Scotland* 188(0?) notes that Edinburgh is called the Athens of the North by James Stuart, co-author with Nicholas Revett of *The Antiquities of Athens ...* (London, 1762), but this is not correct.
- ¹⁶ Lowrey, 'From Caesarea to Athens'.