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## How should we categorise the Scots: as Cowboys or Indians?

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5 This is perhaps an awkward question to ask, on a number of levels. But if we are trying to evaluate Scotland's place within both the contemporary world and its fairly brutal history, on which side of the division between 'cowboys and Indians' can we realistically expect to fall?

Of course, the phrase itself is quite loaded, and incredibly simplistic.

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I do not mean literally the division between white American cowboys (think John Wayne) and the various Indigenous nations the cowboys labelled as 'Indians'.

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Underlying the cinematic battles between these two parties of apparent equals, the question highlights something very important.

The cowboys were the colonisers and the Indians were the colonised.

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The cowboys grew prosperous from the resources they violently seized from the Indians, and thus built a powerful nation.

More broadly, the metaphor of cowboys and Indians refers to our judgements of history. In particular, does Scotland want to be seen (and to think about itself) as a nation that colonised others or was itself colonised?

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It is important to start off with a recognition that much of the rest of the world most likely sees Scotland as part of the 'cowboy team'. Over the course of more than 150 years of history, Scotland (and Scots of all classes) were willing participants in the project of British imperialism.

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Scots were colonial administrators, soldiers, governors, merchants, bankers, explorers, and much more. Much of Scotland grew wealthy on resources that were extracted from the British colonies. A lot of wealth poured into Scotland (particularly Glasgow) from the trading of slaves, and more particularly the commodities that were produced by enslaved people — such as tobacco and sugar.

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We need to recognise our own history: Scots were a large part of the British empire, willing participants in the global structures of power that exploited and robbed large swathes of Asia, Africa, and elsewhere.

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It was through the unification of Scots with England that a successful partnership emerged, founded on the emerging idea of whiteness. Scotland was always a junior partner, but both sides together built up powerful domains based on the idea of being racially distinct and politically dominant over other ('subservient') 'races'.

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Throughout the parts of the world where the British settled and predominated — the white diaspora of the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand — Scots are a distinctly important part of the colonial legacy. Scottish heritage (both genetic and cultural) is respected by many as both the homeland and the home culture.

And Scots definitely bloodied their hands across the empire — in India, Australia, Caribbean, Canada, and elsewhere. One particular example is John MacDonald, who was born in Scotland and became the first

Canadian Prime Minister. MacDonald is perhaps most remembered for bringing about the Canadian confederation, but also as Prime Minister he introduced the brutal and abusive residential schools for the forced assimilation of Indigenous children. He also used the term 'Aryan' in the Canadian Parliament, and argued that Asians were a different species from (white) Europeans.

In this respect, Scots were definitely the cowboys. Indeed, for some the Scots were the shining white knights of civilisation. After all, the classic romantic Celtic portrayals of Scotland by the unionist novelist Walter Scott had a strong influence on the rise of the KKK, as Mark Twain noted. Torches and burning crosses are lifted from his pages.

But in Scotland today the division is not so clear.

There is now (and has been for a very long time) a side of Scottish identity (particularly Scottish separatist, national identity) that perceives Scots ('ordinary Scots') as on the side of the Indians, in some way.

After all, modern Scottish history, from the time of the forced Union onwards, was a process of colonisation by the dominating English. There was Culloden, and the devastation of the highland clearances, and this goes through to Thatcher's economic devastation, the miners strike and its aftermath, and the poll tax.

Although Scotland did largely benefit from the empire, this was a shotgun wedding. England, in particular through the British state, have treated Scotland like 'Indian country'.

Of course, not all cowboys in the American West were unequivocally bad, or structurally powerful. Contemporary westerns have given us the images of cowboys-turned-Indian in *Dances with Wolves*, and most recently the reality of African American cowboys, through the lens of Quentin Tarantino. Perhaps as many as one in four cowboys were black.

But we cannot push this analogy too far. It would be foolish to suggest that Scots were the 'black cowboys' of the British empire, particularly as the Scots in empire were themselves, for the large part, determinedly white. That is, Scots may have been a junior partner to the English in the large project of running an empire, but they were not racialised, enslaved, and dehumanised in the way that whites (English, Scottish, and America) treated Africans in America.

In this respect, as part of the empire, Scots were definitely cowboys, even if their own country was largely colonised.

This in itself was not unusual for the empire. After all, some communities and regions of colonial India became successful under British rule. And the British used Indians across their empire. This was not only as labourers (under a harsh indenture system), but also educated communities that became the middle management of imperial rule, particularly in East Africa.

In this case, the Indians (from India) became part of the colonial administration, the rule of the cowboys. But in that hierarchy, which placed the 'local' Africans at the bottom, the mid-tier Indians were treated as subservient to the highest ranking white British — both Scots and English.

In short, there were levels of empire, it was not all a binary between cowboys and Indians. But Scotland was near the top of these levels, united with the English by the power of the union and whiteness.

95 One of the reasons why I ask this question is that I have — from time to time, as they say — heard pro-independence Scots rely on the assurance that throughout the history of empire most Scots were definitely on the Indian side.

100 Much of this argument comes down to a simple reading of class and wealth in Scotland. There were definitely an aristocracy and upper-class in Scotland who became Anglicised within the British union and empire. Many of these became very wealthy from the various projects of empire — trade, plunder, and enslavement.

105 But this is not the whole story. Scotland in general benefited from empire, particularly the industrialised and mercantile central belt. Of those displaced by the Clearances in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, if they remained in Scotland they ended up in work in Glasgow and its surrounds, in industries created on the back (and in the heart) of the empire.

110 When the Scottish Labour movement developed in the nineteenth century, it never became a movement for independence — it was not a Congress Party. This cannot solely be explained by the political dominance of England. There was no mass political movement for Scottish independence until the early twenty-first century. Long running and widespread sympathies did develop, but the benefits of empire largely kept Scots within the British union.

115 And so, in many ways it seems like appropriation for Scots to claim the status of Indians. Up until the later years of the twentieth century, Scotland was too involved with British imperialism to be anything but cowboys, participants in the colonisation of much of the world.

120 As we bring our focus onto the present, however, things are quite different. The UK remains an imperial state, and even after more than half a century, the union is still unable to forget or even recognise its dark history. The past year has seen the rise of a falsely-premised claim for ‘British independence’, to take back control, and to see new trade relations based on the sinister concept of Empire 2.0.

125 Alongside this, Scotland has been going through a different process. There is still a core of unionist, imperially nostalgic Scots who participate in the main discourses of England’s retreat to this colonial revivalism. But alongside this, a significant part of the movement for Scottish national independence is a rejection of the inward and outward imperialism that is bound up with the British union.

130 And this is why I ask this question about ‘cowboys and Indians’. It is not enough for the Scottish independence movement to simply claim the role of colonised and oppressed.

135 In many respects, Scotland is one of England’s last colonies, but as a colony Scotland did a lot less worse than many other parts of the empire. It is only in recent years that Scotland can begin to understand the rapaciousness of British dominance, when Scotland’s oil production has kept the economy of the United Kingdom afloat.

But I would like to see an independent Scotland that thinks again about not only its historical relationship with England (and the British union), but also about the nuances and shade of its own particular history.

140 What can be learned from the excesses of Scotland’s role within empire? How do we as a nation remember not the high points, but also the unsavoury history? How do we recognise the role that exploitation of others has made Scotland the prosperous nation it is today? And how can we eradicate the remaining vestiges of rampant racism, colonialism, and exploitation that made up much of Scotland’s history?

145 In choosing to seek separation from its colonial history, Scotland also needs to ally itself with the 'Indians' — that is the global south — and look for constructive ways to partner in new, decolonised ways with those we once colonised.

In sum, Scotland cannot ignore or whitewash our past. We must instead learn from it, and show the world how independence can make us a globally facing partner to nations we once used as subjects.

(2017)