

Letter from Scotland

We've been making a lot of apologies recently. This week it was to the Nisga'a people in Canada for "stealing" their sacred totem pole and keeping it in our National Museum in Edinburgh for nearly a hundred years.

It's now to be returned to its original home in British Columbia. Brightly costumed members of the Nisga'a nation came to Edinburgh for the hand-over ceremony and reminded us of our rather embarrassing colonial past.

The 37ft totem pole was carved from a red-cedar tree in 1855. Somehow it went missing from its village, while the villagers were out hunting. A Canadian anthropologist bought it from a mysterious totem pole trader and then shockingly sold it to the Edinburgh museum in 1929. It has stood there scowling ever since.



Delegates from the Nisga'a Nation with the Ni'isjoohl Memorial Pole. Image credit Duncan McGlynn



Sometime we just have to hang our heads in shame. Detail from the Nisga'a totem pole.

It's not the first "colonial" object to be returned from Scotland. Last year, Glasgow Museum returned six 14th century carvings to India. In 1998, Glasgow handed back a famous "ghost shirt" to the Sioux Indians in South Dakota. It had been worn for spiritual protection by a warrior at the Battle of Wounded Knee in 1890. It was sold to the Kelvingrove Museum by a member of Buffalo Bill's "Wild West Show" which came to Glasgow in 1891. The National Museum in Edinburgh is now thinking about repatriating a number of 16th century bronze sculptures to Benin, looted by British troops during a raid on the royal palace in 1897.

It all raises the question of where these treasures should be displayed. Does every world heritage object have to go back to its original home? Can we make do with reproductions to tell their story? And what does it all say about our colonial past?

As the Nisga'a Nation's delegation remarked when they collected their totem pole, it "turns the colonial gaze onto itself".

The Scots stomped round the British Empire as soldiers, engineers and administrators, treating the natives badly in many cases. In recent years we've been apologising for our slave-trading past. In 2019 Glasgow University became the first British university to set up a reparations fund to acknowledge that 23 of its Victorian donors had made their fortunes on the back of slaves in their sugar and tobacco plantations in the Caribbean. The Henry Dundas monument, our own totem pole in St Andrew Square in Edinburgh, has had a new plaque fixed to it, explaining his role in the slave trade. As a senior government minister he blocked the anti-slave-trading bill for 15 years, during which time half a million slaves were shipped from Africa to America and the Caribbean.

There is an uneasy debate going on in Scotland over how much we are responsible for the sins of our fathers. We tend to take pride in their achievements – the invention of the steam engine, the phone, the television, anaesthetics, the game of golf and, some say, even football. But should we also apologise for our weaknesses – the slave trade and acquiring precious artefacts from conquered nations? Yes, I suppose so.

We've had other things to apologise for this week. Deaths from alcohol abuse have reached a 14 year high, at 1,276, the worst rate in Europe. And the explanation seems to be "poverty", particularly in the west of Scotland. The mystery is why the numbers have almost doubled since the 1990s when there was also a good deal of poverty about. Some blame the Covid pandemic. And others say it's because alcohol has become too cheap.

To try to rectify that, The Scottish Government in 2018 imposed a "minimum unit price" (MUP) on alcohol of 50p/unit – much opposed by the drinks industry of course. The government

insists the policy has worked, the death rate has been cut by 13 per cent because of it. But it's obviously not worked well enough to bring the overall number of deaths down, so there are now calls for the MUP to be increased in line with inflation to 65p/unit. The effectiveness of the MUP is disputed by the Tories who say that the UK Statistics Authority agreed with them that the SNP was misrepresenting the results of the report. The government is also still thinking about a ban on alcohol advertising.

Scotland has a similar problem with drug deaths, also the highest rate in Europe, and in both cases the death rate is only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath it are families blighted by poverty, under-employment and despair. And those are not the only issues we need to apologise for. There's a whole pile of others, as we were finding out this week with the harrowing tales of witnesses to the current child abuse inquiry and the Covid inquiry.

In all this, it's easy to get weighted down with Presbyterian guilt and to ask if there is something wrong with our culture in Scotland. We've just come through a successful Edinburgh festivals season – 130,000 tickets sold for the official festival, and 2.4 million for the Fringe – and it's tempting to think our culture is in good health.

But the director Nicola Benedetti's question, written in yellow on all the venues, still haunts me: "Where do we go from here?" I suppose the answer is – apologise and make what reparations we can.



Nicola Benedetti, CBE, the Director of Edinburgh International Festival announcing her first programme for the 2023 Edinburgh International Festival PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter