

From Celtic to *sell*-tic? The Uses of the Thistle in Twenty-First-Century Scotland

Résumé. Le but de cet article est de mieux comprendre comment le chardon est utilisé en tant qu'emblème de l'Écosse, par qui et pourquoi. Associé aussi bien à l'ancien Royaume d'Écosse qu'à la culture populaire et à la consommation de masse en Écosse, le chardon semble omniprésent dans la société écossaise du XXI^e siècle. Cet article explore dans quelle mesure cet emblème peut être réinterprété comme un puissant marqueur d'identité qui permet aux Écossais de renforcer leur appartenance nationale dans leur vie de tous les jours.

Mots-clefs. Chardon, emblème, nationalisme, Écosse contemporaine

Abstract. The purpose of this article is to better understand how the thistle is used as an emblem of contemporary Scotland, by whom, and why. Whether it is associated with the former kingdom of Scotland, with pop culture or with mass consumption, the thistle appears to permeate twenty-first-century Scottish society. This paper thus investigates to what extent this emblem can be re-interpreted as a powerful identity marker, used by the Scots as a way to bolster their sense of belonging to the Scottish nation in their everyday lives.

Keywords. Thistle, emblem, nationalism, contemporary Scotland

Introduction

Legend has it that in 1263, a force of barefoot Norsemen under King Haakon IV of Norway were about to sneak up on a group of sleeping Scotsmen near Largs, Ayrshire, as part of a night-time invasion. One of the Vikings trod on a thistle, screamed out in pain, and thus alerted the Scots of the imminent attack. The thistle, which allegedly saved the Scots from their assailants, is thus believed to have been symbolically associated with Scotland from the reign of King Alexander III.¹

It was only two centuries later, however, that the thistle started being used as an official emblem of Scotland and being recognised as such. King James III had the reverse of silver groats featuring thistle heads minted between 1470 and 1488, which served to establish a widespread visual link between the kingdom of Scotland, its power and wealth, and the thistle as its national badge.² Moreover, King James III possessed the Blue Blanket, a flag allegedly used during the Crusades and on which the king's wife painted St Andrew's cross and a thistle surmounted by a crown. That standard was donated to Edinburgh craftsmen for their support in freeing the monarch from Edinburgh Castle following a conspiracy,³ which further suggests that the prickly plant was recognised as a signifier for the kingdom of Scotland by the fifteenth century. Similarly, William Dunbar resorted to the thistle image in his 1503 poem, 'The Thris-sil and the Rois', to designate King James IV, who, several months later, married the rose, a metaphor for Princess Margaret of England.⁴

The most durable representation of the kingdom of Scotland as a thistle is the Order of the Thistle. This is the highest order of knighthood in Scotland, which was formally established in 1687 by King James VII of Scotland and II of England in recognition of religious and political services rendered to the monarch. The insignia of the Order displays a thistle as well as the following motto – *Nemo me impune lacessit* (No one can harm me unpunished) – in reference to the thistle's and therefore Scotland's resilience.⁵

1. JOHNSON, Ben, "The Thistle – National Emblem of Scotland", *Historic UK*, <<https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/The-Thistle-National-Emblem-of-Scotland/>>, last accessed on 27 October 2021.

2. "Record > Coin (reverse), groat, from reign of James III", *National Museums Scotland*, <<http://nms.scran.ac.uk/database/record.php?usi=000-190-000-343-C>>, last accessed on 5 October 2021.

3. PENNECUIK, Alexander (of), *The History of the Blue Blanket; or, Crafts-Man's Banner*, David Bower, Edinburgh, 1756: 27-8.

4. DUNBAR, William, "The Thrissil and the Rois", in *The Poems of William Dunbar Now First Collected. With Notes, and a Memoir of His Life. By David Laing*, vol. 1, Laing and Forbes, Edinburgh, 1834: 3-10, <<https://deriv.nls.uk/dcn23/8132/81328425.23.pdf>>, last accessed on 5 October 2021.

5. NICOLAS, Nicholas Harris (Sir), *The Statutes of the Order of the Thistle*, William Pickering, Edinburgh, 1828. *Statutes of the Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of the Thistle Revived by His Majesty James II of England and Seventh of Scotland, and Again Revived by Her Majesty Queen Anne*, Harrison & Sons, London, 1905.

The association of the thistle with the ancient kingdom of Scotland has consequently been established for several centuries. Nevertheless, the thistle symbol itself has evolved and been adopted for both official and unofficial purposes. Various forms and shapes of the thistle have been incorporated into the logos of Scottish institutions, organisations, and companies, and a wide range of Scottish businesses have chosen the word ‘Thistle’ as part of their names since the late twentieth century. The omnipresence of the thistle as a signifier for Scotland has for instance been acknowledged by VisitScotland, Scotland’s national tourism agency:

Thistles aren’t just found in gardens, parks and in the countryside. Keep your eyes peeled and you will see the insignia emblem cropping up all over Scotland, from the strip of the international rugby team and football clubs, to local businesses and major organisations and corporations, to the uniforms of police officers.⁶

What meanings have therefore been ascribed to the thistle in contemporary Scotland? How has it been used in recent years, by whom, and why? Has the thistle as an emblem of Scotland, one of the six Celtic nations,⁷ become a simple product of mass consumption – a banal *sell-tic* marketable item? What does the thistle on the UK coat of arms share with the thistle printed on a mug that can be bought in a shop? Can the latter be viewed as a sub-standard/sub-national version of the former or, on the contrary, can contemporary adoptions of the thistle be interpreted as powerful identity markers, used by the Scots as a way to further the development of Scottish nationhood?

This research is underpinned by the concept of *Banal Nationalism* developed by Michael Billig in the 1990s, i.e. the fact that the “whole complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations and practices” which shape national identity find their origins in the banal sphere of everyday life.⁸ This idea was expanded on by Tim Edensor in his work entitled *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*, which explores “the unspectacular, contemporary production of national identity through popular culture and in everyday life”.⁹ The aim of this article is ultimately to demonstrate that the thistle emblem in twenty-first-century Scotland is being endorsed as a potent marker of Scottish national identity. Scotland’s national emblem may be linked to a legend, but it has an influence on the everyday fashioning of contemporary Scottishness.¹⁰

6. “About Scotland’s National Flower”, *VisitScotland*, <<https://www.visitscotland.com/about/uniquely-scottish/thistle/>>, last accessed on 5 October 2021.

7. Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, the Isle of Man and Brittany are commonly referred to as the six Celtic nations, where Celtic languages are spoken. Contemporary interpretations of Scotland being Celtic are also mostly underpinned by tartanry, i.e. stereotypical representations of Scotland, which for instance depict it as a land of wild romantic heather and thistle-covered glens (as this article will explain in a subsequent section).

8. BILLIG, Michael, *Banal Nationalism*, Sage, London, 1995: 6.

9. EDENSOR, Tim, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*, Berg/Oxford International Publishers Ltd, Oxford, 2002: 12.

10. Even though the thistle is famously known as a metaphor for Scotland in Hugh MacDiarmid’s 1926 Scot-

The official uses of the thistle as an emblem of Scotland

The thistle as an emblematic representation of Scotland is arguably used in three different ways – through the channel of the British state in order to designate Scotland as one of the constitutive entities of the United Kingdom, through official national channels, i.e. through authoritative bodies, in order to refer to Scotland as a nation, and through non-official channels, namely mostly the private sector, in order to foster Scottish national identity.¹¹

The Order of the Thistle still has relevance today, as a service is organised every other year in the Thistle Chapel in St. Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh, to welcome new Members into the Order and acknowledge their contributions to Scottish society. The Thistle Chapel itself was especially designed and built in the early twentieth century for the Thistle Service, as it accommodates the stalls of the Knights and Ladies, the Sovereign's Stall and two Royal stalls.¹² The monarch of the United Kingdom appoints Members of the Order of the Thistle, which means that he is, as the embodiment of the British state, the custodian of that ancient Scottish tradition.¹³ The role Queen Elizabeth II played in that respect was highlighted in 2018 by Nick Philipps's latest portrait of Her Majesty the Queen wearing the traditional dark velvet green mantle of the Order of the Thistle, the collar of gold depicting thistles and sprigs of rue, the St Andrew or badge-appendant, as well as the star of the Order. The painting, which was produced for the 2018 Thistle Service, is currently displayed in the Palace of Holyroodhouse.¹⁴

Such an official representation serves to underline Scotland's political status within the United Kingdom. Thus, the British state itself to some extent contributes to the use of the thistle emblem as a marker of Scottishness. As Tim Edensor argues, the state is instrumental in providing an instrumental structure to the shaping of nationhood:

tish Renaissance poem, "A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle", which explores the country's split identity through a wide range of political, cultural, and social themes, this article does not analyse the uses of this symbol in Scottish literature and poetry, so as to better highlight the purpose the thistle serves in popular culture and everyday life in twenty-first-century Scotland.

11. Finding out exactly when each of these channels started using the thistle as an emblematic representation of Scotland was unfortunately not possible for this article due to time constraints and the number of examples analysed. This article aims instead at demonstrating that the thistle has been consistently used in twenty-first-century Scotland as a symbol of Scottish nationhood in a variety of public- and private-sector areas.

12. "Thistle Chapel", *St Giles' Cathedral*, <<https://stgilescathedral.org.uk/thistle-chapel/>>, last accessed on 27 October 2021.

13. "The Order of the Thistle", *The Royal Household*, <<https://www.royal.uk/order-thistle>>, last accessed on 27 October 2021.

14. "News > Nicky Philipps paints her Majesty the Queen for third time", *Fine Art Commissions*, <<https://www.fineartcommissions.com/news#queen>>, last accessed on 5 October 2021.

In a very practical sense, national identity is facilitated by the state's legislative framework, which delimits and regulates the practices in which people can partake, the spaces in which they are permitted to move, and in many other ways provides a framework for quotidian experience.¹⁵

The fact that the star of the Order of the Thistle has been adopted as the regimental badge of the Scots Guards, one of the infantry regiments of the British Army defending the UK as a whole,¹⁶ and the fact that the thistle appears on the badge of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom as a signifier for Scotland, alongside the Tudor rose representing England and Wales and the flax flower for Northern Ireland, further reinforce the British state's role in evoking associations between Scotland and the thistle.¹⁷

The enduring symbolic significance of the thistle can be accounted for by its endorsement by the Scottish state and subsequently by the British state. The legend associated with the Battle of Largs in 1263 and the Scottish victory it represents have paved the ground for the popularity of the thistle emblem: "an effective nationalism must have recourse to a set of foundational myths that provide 'roots' for identity".¹⁸ However, the expression of Scottish national identity through the thistle emblem is not limited to official state purposes. A variety of national channels which are specific to Scotland (as opposed to the UK as a whole) have endorsed the thistle as a symbol of Scottishness – a trend which has accelerated since devolution.

The arms of office of the Lord Lyon King of Arms, the chief herald of Scotland and the head of the Lyon Court, Scotland's heraldic authority, perhaps best illustrate how the thistle has been endorsed as a national emblem by a Scottish public body.¹⁹ A thistle is depicted in the escutcheon as being held in the right hand of a red lion rampant with blue claws and a blue tongue under St Andrew's cross. The Lord Lyon's golden collar of thistles alternating with sprigs of rue from which the badge of St Andrew hangs is identical to the collar of the Order of the Thistle, since the Lord Lyon himself is the King of Arms of the Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of the Thistle and the Secretary of the Order of the Thistle. Several thistles also appear on the batons of the Lord Lyon. Likewise, the two supporters on either side of the coat of arms are red lions rampant whose bodies are covered with golden thistles.²⁰ No other coat of arms, badge, emblem or logo arguably uses the thistle symbol to designate Scotland to that extent, which is not surprising since the Court of the Lord Lyon is a unique court of law which regulates Scottish heraldry in Scotland and abroad. As such, the thistle has resonance as a national symbol both within and beyond the borders of Scotland.

15. EDENSOR, Tim, *op. cit.*: 20.

16. *Scots Guards*, <<https://scotsguards.org/>>, last accessed on 27 October 2021.

17. *The Supreme Court*, <<https://www.supremecourt.uk/>>, last accessed on 27 October 2021.

18. EDENSOR, Tim, *op. cit.*: 152.

19. *The Court of the Lord Lyon*, <<http://courtofthelordlyon.scot/>>, last accessed on 28 October 2021.

20. "The Court of the Lord Lyon", *Historylinks Archive*, <<https://www.historylinksarchive.org.uk/pictures/document/2466.pdf>>, last accessed on 27 October 2021.

VisitScotland, Scotland's national tourism organisation, an executive public body of the Scottish Government, has also played a key role since devolution in promoting the thistle as Scotland's national flower in the eyes of the Scots and the British, but also in those of the world. Indeed, although VisitScotland's main markets are domestic – Scotland and England – its corporate plan extends to the USA, Germany, France and Australia.²¹ The thistle appears on VisitScotland's logo design and the prickly plant's purple colour is used as the colour scheme of VisitScotland's website.²² The national flower has also been chosen as the central theme for the Scottish Thistle Awards, an initiative launched in 1992 by Scotland's national tourism agency (then called the Scottish Tourist Board), in recognition of the “individuals, businesses, partnerships and events for their innovation, excellence and success in the [Scottish] hospitality and tourism sector”.²³ The local winners of five regions – Aberdeen City and Shire ; Central Fife and Tayside ; Highlands and Islands ; Lothians and Borders ; West – progress to the National Final awards ceremony.²⁴ The thistle-shaped trophy awarded to the winner can therefore be regarded as the Oscar of Scotland's tourism industry. In this context, the thistle thus becomes a badge conferred in recognition of economic services performed for the Scottish nation, much in the same way as the Order of the Thistle was initially awarded for political and religious services rendered to the Scottish monarchy. As Edensor explains, ‘[o]ld symbols fade into disuse, are reinvigorated, are appropriated by different causes and reinterpreted, and new symbols are invented, claimed and circulated’.²⁵ Likewise, the symbolic meanings of the thistle are reinterpreted so as to acquire greater relevance in Scotland's contemporary society.

The thistle has also been adopted in various areas of institutional life in Scotland. The logo of the University of Edinburgh, for instance, features a thistle which is vertically aligned above a book symbolising knowledge and a stylised castle representing the city of Edinburgh. These are superimposed on the cross of St Andrew. The logo was created in the early 1990s, as a contemporary interpretation of the university coat of arms.²⁶ Thus, the thistle serves to establish a link between the past – the University of Edinburgh being one of the oldest Scottish universities and education being one of the key pillars of the ancient Scottish kingdom which was maintained following the 1707 Acts of Union – and the present – with the ancient coat of arms being transformed into a corporate brand reflecting the global reputation of the University.

21. “VisitScotland's Corporate Plan 2017-2020 (2019 Revision)”, *VisitScotland*, <<https://www.visitscotland.org/binaries/content/assets/dot-org/pdf/annual-and-corporate-reports/vs-corporate-plan-2017-20-2019-revision.pdf>>, last accessed on 28 October 2021.

22. *VisitScotland*, <<https://www.visitscotland.org/>>, last accessed on 28 October 2021.

23. “About Us”, *Scottish Thistle Awards*, <<https://www.scottishthistleawards.co.uk/about-us/>>, last accessed on 28 October 2021.

24. *Ibid.*

25. EDENSOR, Tim, *op. cit.*: 170.

26. “Chapter 1: Our logo”, *Brand Essentials v3*, Communications and Marketing, The University of Edinburgh, October 2018: 6, <<https://docplayer.net/6012083-Brand-essentials-making-us-all-look-good-chapter-1-our-logo.html>> last accessed on 15 September 2022.

Similarly, when Police Scotland was formed in 2013 as a merger of regional police forces in Scotland, it adopted a blue thistle surmounted by a crown as its logo.²⁷ Various former law enforcement agencies such as Central Scotland Police, Grampian Police, Tayside Police, and Strathclyde Police, among others, had also adopted a thistle topped by a crown as part of their logos in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The fact that a variation on that theme was chosen for the national police force of Scotland reinforces the idea that the thistle is widely recognised as a national emblem of Scotland which conjures up the notion of national unity, even more so when national security is involved.

The field of sports in Scotland is also illustrative of the role that the thistle symbol plays in bringing the nation together. Sports teams which represent the nation of Scotland on the global stage, such as Scottish Rugby, Scottish Gymnastics, and Netball Scotland, have adapted the thistle symbol to the characteristics of their sports. The Scottish Rugby thistle is oval-shaped like a rugby ball;²⁸ the stem, the leaves, and the head of the Scottish Gymnastics thistle logo are made to look like a gymnast;²⁹ and the head of the Netball Scotland thistle logo represents a netball ball.³⁰ The fact that Scottish Rugby, Scottish Gymnastics, and Netball Scotland are national governing bodies for their respective sports in Scotland means that they showcase Scotland on the international stage and that they contribute to spreading the use of the thistle as an emblem of Scotland both in and outside of Scotland. This idea is reinforced by the fact that the unofficial national anthem of Scotland, Flower of Scotland, has been sung at sporting events such as rugby matches since 1990,³¹ and by the fact that the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games chose an anthropomorphic thistle called Clyde, named after the River Clyde which flows through Glasgow, as its mascot.³²

Other uses of the thistle which have had a national impact could be mentioned, such as the thistle logo of the National Trust for Scotland, whose role is to preserve Scotland's natural and cultural heritage, and which organises "Thistle Camps", namely residential working holidays for over 18s.³³ All these examples tend to suggest that the thistle is recognised as an iconic

27. *Police Scotland Poileas Alba*, <<https://www.scotland.police.uk/>>, last accessed on 28 October 2021.

28. "About Scottish Rugby", *Scottish Rugby*, <<https://www.scottishrugby.org/about/>>, last accessed on 29 October 2021.

29. 'About Scottish Gymnastics', *Scottish Gymnastics*, <<https://www.scottishgymnastics.org/scottish-gymnastics-about-scottish-gymnastics>>, last accessed on 29 October 2021.

30. 'Who We Are', *Netball Scotland*, <<https://www.netballscotland.com/about/who-we-are/>>, last accessed on 29 October 2021.

31. REID, Leia, "Have Scots had enough of Flower of Scotland? Readers have their say on country's sporting anthem", *Scottish Daily Express*, <<https://www.scottishdailyexpress.co.uk/sport/scots-enough-flower-scotland-readers-27726485>>, last accessed 21 November 2022.

32. "Clyde the official Glasgow 2014 mascot", *Glasgow 2014*, <<http://www.glasgow2014.com/celebrate/mascot>>, last accessed on 15 September 2022.

33. "Working Holidays", *National Trust for Scotland*, <<https://www.nts.org.uk/working-holidays>>, last accessed on 29 October 2021.

symbol of Scotland which permeates various levels of society, and that it can be adapted to the settings for which it is needed:

For culture is not fixed but negotiated, the subject of dialogue and creativity, influenced by the contexts in which it is produced and used. A sense of national identity then is not a once and for all thing, but it is dynamic and dialogic, found in the constellations of a huge cultural matrix or images, ideas, spaces, things, discourses and practices.³⁴

The thistle emblem is not confined to official state uses restricted to the Order of Thistle or the Supreme Court of the UK. The thistle has been embraced by Scottish national bodies and influential figures that have adjusted it to learning and academia, the tourism industry, the police forces, the fields of sports, and conservation, for instance. Beyond that framework, however, the flexibility of the uses of the thistle as a national symbol of Scotland has undoubtedly been enhanced by unofficial channels, mostly businesses which have put their Scottish identity forwards.

The unofficial uses of the thistle emblem

As Tim Edensor argues:

[...] through the proliferating informational and image flows across global space [...], national myths are being simultaneously decentred or disembedded, and provide a new impetus for national identification.³⁵

Indeed, the rise of information and communication technologies combined with that of the global market have led Scottish businesses to reinterpret the thistle emblem and make it their own.

Glasgow Airport unveiled its new brand identity in July 2013 – a blue G letter topped by a blue curve to make it look like a stylised thistle – accompanied by the slogan “Proud to serve Scotland”.³⁶ As one of the busiest airports in Scotland, Glasgow Airport plays a key role in establishing a “sense of place” and in emphasising its image as an “international gateway to Scotland”.³⁷ Here again, the thistle is meant to be globally identified as standing for Scotland. It can be interpreted as fostering Scottish patriotism among the Scots and as creating lasting connections between the Scottish population and visiting tourists.³⁸

34. EDENSOR, Tim, *op. cit.*: 17.

35. *Ibid.*: 169.

36. *Glasgow Airport*, <<https://www.glasgowairport.com/>>, last accessed on 29 October 2021.

37. *Ibid.*

38. “Scottish agency’s new Thistle brand takes off at Glasgow Airport”, *ResponseSource*, <<https://pressreleases.responsesource.com/news/78667/scottish-agency-s-new-thistle-brand-takes-off-at-glasgow/>>, last accessed on 29 October 2021.

Not all Scottish businesses are as influential as Glasgow Airport, but a wide variety of them, regardless of their geographical locations or their fields of expertise, have adopted thistles as part of their logos and indeed the word “Thistle” itself as part of their names. Some companies have arguably been traditional in their representation of the thistle, such as ThistleFM, a Glasgow-based firm which offers property services and maintenance, which stylised its dot on the i of “thistle” into a small green and purple thistle head, and which had the word “Thistle” printed in dark blue and “FM” in green.³⁹ Similarly, Thistle Timber & Building Supplies, an Edinburgh-based company, simply adopted two thistles on either side of its name with a purple and green colour scheme for its website.⁴⁰

In contrast, some Scottish businesses have been more modern and innovative in their approaches, such as Thistle Plumbing and Heating Services Ltd, which adopted a white thistle against a partly orange and partly blue flame standing for the heating and plumbing services offered by the company.⁴¹ The Inverness-shire-based agency called Thistle Tours, which specialises in organising sightseeing tours around the Highlands of Scotland, chose a blue thistle logo whose head is a rotating globe.⁴² The Prickly Thistle weaving mill based in Evanton in the Ross and Cromarty area designed what they call a stylised “rebel thistle logo” inspired by “the alchemy elements of earth, air, water and fire”.⁴³ Surprisingly, two Scottish companies have adopted the exact same logo, a golden pointillist thistle with dots of varying sizes and a teardrop edging – Thistle Steel which customs steel buildings in Beith, North Ayrshire,⁴⁴ and Thistle Shoes Scotland based in Glenrothes, Fife, which manufactures traditional footwear such as piper brogues, ghillie brogues and Highland Dance pumps.⁴⁵

Thistle Products Ltd has possibly come up with one of the most inventive thistle logos. The dot of the i letter of the word Thistle is made to look like the body of a thistle stylised as Nessie, on which a group of people, including a Scottie dog, a Highland dancer and a golfer who are taking part in a range of Scottish activities, are standing to represent the flowerhead of the thistle. The word “Thistle” itself is printed in white against a purple tartan pattern. Thistle Products Ltd also owns a range of brands including the A Gift from Scotland brand which incorporates a black thistle on the right-hand side and a tartan edging at the bottom. Thistle Products Ltd supplies what they call “iconic Scottish gifts and souvenirs” “[f]rom the stylish

39. *Thistlefm*, <<http://www.thistlefm.co.uk/index.html>>, last accessed on 29 October 2021.

40. *Thistle Timber & Building Supplies*, <<https://www.thistlebuildingsupplies.co.uk/about-us/>>, last accessed on 29 October 2021.

41. *Thistle Plumbing & Heating Services Ltd*, <<https://thistlephs.co.uk/>>, last accessed on 29 October 2021.

42. “About Us”, *Thistle Tours*, <<http://www.thistletours.com/about-us/>>, last accessed on 29 October 2021.

43. “Inclusive Creativity”, *Prickly Thistle*, <<https://pricklythistle.shop/pages/inclusive-creativity>>, last accessed on 15 September 2022.

44. “About Us”, *Thistle Steel*, <<https://www.thistlesteel.co.uk/about>>, last accessed on 30 October 2021.

45. *Thistle Shoes*, <<https://thistleshoes.com/>>, last accessed on 30 October 2021.

to the downright silly”, such as fluffy Nessie and Highland Coo toys, Kilt towels, flags, caps, mugs and socks.⁴⁶

The sheer number of Scottish businesses which have adopted thistle logos or the word Thistle as part of their names, a few examples of which have been provided above, suggests that the thistle symbol has been appropriated by the Scots themselves, who have bypassed the official channels to make that emblem their own:

[...] national identity [...] is similarly heterogeneous, is constituted by innumerable pathways, connections and sources. In the contemporary network of identity formation, the national is found in a bewilderingly dense profusion of signifiers, objects, practices and spaces.⁴⁷

The multiplicity of thistle emblems to designate Scotland shows that it is a badge of Scottish national identity that can be embraced by state/national bodies and businesses alike, and that it has become part of everyday life in twenty-first-century Scotland.⁴⁸ To some extent, however, it can equally be argued that such flexibility has turned the thistle emblem into a product of mass consumption which inappropriately reflects Scotland’s national identity. Has the thistle become a mere *sell*-tic item that can be marketed and consumed by anyone regardless of their connection with Scotland?

From tartanry to national identity

The debate over the representativeness of Scotland’s symbols is not new. Over the last decades, Scottish culture has been criticised for being imbued with tartanry, i.e. historically inaccurate, romanticised and reductive depictions of Scotland engendered by the success of music hall comedian and singer Harry Lauder in the first decades of the twentieth century, and by American movies *Brigadoon* (1954)⁴⁹ and *Braveheart* (1995).⁵⁰

[These] have provoked sharp debate about how Scotland and the Scots (and in *Braveheart’s* case, Scottish history) should be represented on screen. Some Scots have been outraged by the way they, their country and their national history have been portrayed.⁵¹

46. “Home”, *Thistle Products Ltd*, <<https://www.thistleproducts.co.uk/>>, last accessed on 30 October 2021.

47. EDENSOR, Tim, *op. cit.*: 33.

48. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to determine exactly when all of the businesses mentioned in this article were established, but the majority of them – Thistle Shoes and Thistle Products Ltd being exceptions – were founded after devolution.

49. *Brigadoon*, dir. by Vincente Minnelli, Warner Home Video, UK, 2005.

50. *Braveheart*, dir. by Mel Gibson, Fox Home Entertainment, UK, 2004.

51. MCARTHUR, Colin, *Brigadoon, Braveheart and the Scots*, Tauris, London, 2003: 1.

Lauder and these two cinema productions have offered what are considered to be erroneous, regressive and ludicrous visions of the homeland as a secluded rural country of lochs, mists, heather- and thistle-covered glens, bagpipes and tartans.

Today's interpretations of Scotland as being Celtic may be based on tartanry, i.e. the stereotypical representations of Scotland that have come to dominate history, literature, music and the tourist industry. These were sarcastically explored in an exhibition developed by Barbara and Murray Grigor in 1981 and entitled *Scotch Myths: An Exploration of Scotchness*.⁵² It was made into a television show on Channel Four the following year, which portrays a bus of American and Japanese tourists arriving at the castle of the fictional Laird of Dundreich after travelling around Scotland.⁵³ The visitors are surrounded by sheep, Highland glens and hills, thistles, stags, heath, bagpipes and tartan-dressed characters. The show also includes a series of flashbacks to features of the Scottish past which have been transformed into tourist knick-knacks: "History nowadays is really a matter of tastable packaging".⁵⁴

Scotch Myths was followed by a series of critical essays on tartanry edited by Colin McArthur, *Scotch Reels: Scotland in Cinema and Television*, which argues that Scottish culture looks stationary because the same themes have been reworked over and over again:

[...] the frozen discourses of Tartanry [...] provide just such a reservoir of Scottish 'characters', Scottish 'attitudes' and Scottish 'views' which can be drawn upon to give the 'flavour of Scotland', a petrified culture with a misty, mythic, and above all, static past.⁵⁵

To freeze the past, a pre-Union past enabling the Scots to escape from an impersonal and overly-industrialised British present, is arguably what tartanry discourses have attempted to do. They have been associated with 'the loss of identity' following the 1707 Acts of Union and "a removal from 'authentic' Scottishness (whatever that might be)".⁵⁶

The thistle logos discussed earlier, especially those circulated by unofficial channels, can be viewed as contributing to the tartanry movement in the sense that they have proliferated so much that they can be interpreted as distortions of the Order of the Thistle insignia, for instance. Indeed, such tartanry "might appear to form a formidable obstacle to attempts to rebuild and reconstitute a 'progressive' Scottishness".⁵⁷ However, the thistle emblems analysed

52. GRIGOR, Murray & al., *Scotch Myths*, Edinburgh International Festival, Edinburgh, 1981.

53. "Full Record for 'Scotch Myths'", *Scottish Screen Archive*, <<http://ssa.nls.uk/film.cfm?fid=6382>>, last accessed on 31 October 2021.

54. "Scotch Myths (Murray Grigor, 1982) 5-11", *Youtube*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzZSm-VX2M-Q>>, last accessed on 31 October 2021.

55. CAUGHIE, John, "Scottish television: what would it look like?", in *Scotch Reels: Scotland in Cinema and Television*, ed. by Colin McArthur, BFI, London, 1982: 116.

56. EDENSOR, Tim, *op. cit.*: 147.

57. *Ibid.*, 168.

above do not stand for a pre-Union Scottish identity. On the contrary, most of them appear to stand for a post-devolution Scotland in which national bodies and businesses alike have helped reshape and reinterpret Scottish national identity. Contemporary uses of the thistle symbol suggest that nationhood is dynamic, not static:

For emphatically, the evolution of multiple connections does not necessarily dissipate the power of national identity, although it undoubtedly decentres the authoritative formations consolidating around high culture, official political power and national meta-narratives. Rather, points of identification with the nation are increasingly manifold and contested, are situated within dense networks which provide multiple points of contact.⁵⁸

The thistle emblem illustrates the fact that modern nationhood may not be exclusively shaped vertically, from top to bottom, the top representing official government policies. On the contrary, this case study on the thistle tends to suggest that national identity in twenty-first-century Scotland may be shaped horizontally, i.e. by the people themselves. In that sense, the thistle symbol should arguably not be interpreted as a distortion of Scottishness, but as an expression of Scotland's banal nationalism which underlines the importance of the Scots making their national identity part of their everyday lives.

Through their logos and names, Scottish businesses are the key vehicle for spreading the thistle as an emblem of Scotland. This is precisely what VisitScotland, Scotland's national tourism agency, has been promoting, since it has relied on the Scots themselves to endorse their country: "Every person, every community is an advocate and an ambassador for Scotland, their region, their locale".⁵⁹ This broad statement may sound overly ambitious, but it emphasises the idea that the thistle is viewed as part of the Scots' national identity, and that it is owned and appropriated by the whole nation, not just by policy-makers/high-ranking officials. The Thistle Awards mentioned earlier have worked towards that goal and encouraged Scottish businesses to take part in showcasing Scotland in their fields of expertise. Indeed, "individuals construct *new* links with the nation, in affective and cognitive ways, through alternative networks of association, including those offered by relations with objects".⁶⁰ This tends to explain why the bonds that Scottish businesses have formed with Scottish individuals/consumers have helped promote the thistle as a symbol of Scottish nationhood.

Such active participation from the Scottish population has been encouraged by the Scottish Government itself, as evidenced by its public consultation on Scottish culture, *A Culture Strategy for Scotland – reflecting the past, challenging the present, shaping the future*, discussing the aims and actions

58. *Ibid.*, 30.

59. *Sharing the Spirit of Scotland. A Handbook for the Promotion of Scotland – a Plan for Working Together*, VisitScotland, Edinburgh, n.d.: 34.

60. EDENSOR, Tim, *op. cit.*: 137.

of the Scottish Government's ambitions for fostering culture in Scotland.⁶¹ The draft consultation compiled ideas from individuals and communities, but also from private businesses and industries, on how to better support culture across Scotland. The responses were gathered online and by post between 27 June and 19 September 2018 with the results being published in January 2019. The consultation aimed at forming partnerships and alliances between the Scottish government and society. It revealed that most respondents approved of their officials' "vision, ambitions and actions" and that "they wanted to work with the Scottish Government in the further development of the draft strategy".⁶² The contemporary uses of the thistle emblem therefore tend to epitomise the Scottish Government's scheme to empower the Scots in the shaping of their culture. As Jaroslaw Kiliias points out, "The nation may be imagined as horizontal, but to [sic.] in order to function as such, it also requires an elaborate and inevitably vertical institutional structure of a social support".⁶³ The thistle emblem has arguably spread among the Scottish population as a symbol of Scottishness, as it has been sponsored by Scottish businesses, who have themselves been supported by Scotland's national authorities.

Conclusion

This case study has demonstrated that the thistle emblem has evolved considerably across time from its use as a symbol for the ancient Scottish kingdom in the thirteenth century to its use as a logo and as a name (or part of) for Scottish businesses. It has been consistently chosen as a marker of Scottish national identity for centuries, even though the contexts and the ways in which it has been used have drastically changed. In a sense, the thistle emblem has arguably been going back to its roots – to the people. Its renown is believed to have started with Scottish soldiers who were protected by that prickly plant against Viking invaders. Its modern popularity has grown with Scottish individuals who have been buying goods and services from Scottish businesses. Through the consumer society, the Scots have been led to integrate the thistle as part of their national identity.

Thus, as Tim Edensor suggests, "citizenship has been complemented by the rights of people as consumers".⁶⁴ The profile of the thistle as a symbol of Scottish nationhood has been raised by the spread of consumerism. Scotland's national identity has become marketable, not in the sense that it has been uprooted and become a mere commodity, a *sell-tic* item, but in the sense that the Scottish

61. *A Culture Strategy for Scotland: draft for consultation*, Crown Copyright, Edinburgh, juin 2018, <<https://www.gov.scot/publications/culture-strategy-scotland-draft-consultation/>>, last accessed on 1 November 2021.

62. *A Culture Strategy for Scotland – Analysis of responses to the public consultation: Key Themes Report*, Crown Copyright, Edinburgh, January 2019: 7, <<http://www.gov.scot/publications/culture-strategy-scotland-analysis-responses-public-consultation-key-themes-report/pages/1/>>, last accessed on 1 November 2021.

63. KILIAS, Jaroslaw, "Is the National Really a Horizontal Community of Direct Access?", in *Extraordinary Times, IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conference*, vol. 11, Vienna, 2001: 7.

64. EDENSOR, Tim, *op. cit.*: 111.

nation itself has embraced marketing to promote its national image both at home and overseas.⁶⁵

Indeed, research has revealed that Scotland has in the last decade developed a comprehensive nation-branding strategy thanks to a public/private sector partnership supported by VisitScotland and the Scottish Government. The latter has been responsible for the implementation of Scotland's brand vision, the identification of its brand essence, and the dissemination of the nation-brand through a variety of innovative media. These have placed the Scottish people and Scottish businesses, not just public bodies and authorities, at the heart of all communications.⁶⁶

For example, through its latest advertising campaigns, *The Spirit of Scotland* (2016) and *Scotland is Now* (since 2018), VisitScotland has contributed to shaping Scotland's nation-brand, a “*unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements*”,⁶⁷ rooted in the homeland's history, landscapes, architecture, engineering, arts, and social rights. In order to do so, VisitScotland has provided Scottish businesses with tips and digital tools to enhance their business activities and international visibility, such as downloadable banners and twibbons⁶⁸ displaying the #ScotSpirit slogan, free images from the VisitScotland Digital and Media Library to incorporate into their own business documentation, e-books explaining the stakes of the advertising campaign, and access to a digital community.⁶⁹ Therefore, branding experts, Scottish businesses, and the people of Scotland have all been encouraged to “work together” and get involved in nation-branding.⁷⁰

The current marketability of the thistle emblem may consequently be interpreted as part of a broad government-sponsored strategy to brand the characteristics of Scotland's national identity, make them instantly identifiable with Scotland, and spread them across the global stage. Could it be further argued that the thistle's popularity in twenty-first-century Scotland is a subtle reminder that the country used to be independent? Has the thistle been so widely adopted through official and unofficial channels precisely because it can be viewed, both in and outside Scotland, as a symbol of Scottish autonomy, and indeed independence?

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65. The use of marketing admittedly means that Scotland relies on certain clichés, but the thistle can be immediately recognised across the world and associated with Scotland, which makes it an efficient advertising tool.

66. BRANCAZ-MCCARTAN, Lauren, “The Construction of Scotland as a Nation-Brand”, in *International Review of Studies in Applied Modern Languages*, S.C. Roprint S.R.L., Cluj-Napoca, special edition, 2018: 36-46.

67. DINNIE, Keith, *Nation branding*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford, 2008: 15.

68. A twibbon is a small image that can be added to a profile picture to show support for a movement.

69. *Sharing the Spirit of Scotland. A Handbook for the Promotion of Scotland*, VisitScotland, Edinburgh, 2016: 38, 46. “Sharing the Spirit of Scotland”, in *VisitScotland.org*, <http://www.visitscotland.org/business_support/advice_materials/toolkits/sharing_the_spirit_of_scotland.aspx?utm_source=eUpdate&utm_medium=newsletter&utm_campaign=Spirit%20of%20Scotland>, last accessed on 9 November 2021.

70. *Sharing the Spirit of Scotland*, *op. cit.*: 5.