

# Studies in Scottish Literature

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Volume 48  
Issue 1 *SSL 48.1 Scottish Cosmopolitanism at  
the Fin de Siècle*

Article 7

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5-8-2022

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### Recommended Citation

Murray, Alex (2022) "Unionism, Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism: Ruraidh Erskine of Marr at the Fin de Siècle," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 48: Iss. 1, 61–70.

DOI: 10.51221/sc.ssl.2022.48.1.7

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol48/iss1/7>

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## **UNIONISM, NATIONALISM, COSMOPOLITANISM: RURAI DH ERSKINE OF MARR AT THE *FIN DE SIÈCLE***

*Alex Murray*

Studies of late-Victorian cosmopolitanism tend to emphasize the fundamentally progressive nature of the idea, reflecting a much broader, positive value it holds in academic discourse. As Timothy Brennan notes, the term's connotations in English are "relentlessly positive": "'free from provincial prejudice', 'not limited to one part of the world', 'sophisticated, urbane worldly'. Its antonyms are pejorative in a simple detonative sense; they do not require a context to damn them."<sup>1</sup> One of the steadfast antonyms of cosmopolitanism is, of course, nationalism; yet where exactly do we locate Unionism amidst the tensions between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in this period? How might a fundamentally conservative nationalism that advocates a renovated Unionism as a form of transnational idealism work? In this essay I will examine the peculiar case of Stuart Erskine, or Ruiraidh Erskine of Marr as he was to be known after around 1900.

Erskine is an important, if at times divisive, figure in the history of Scottish nationalism. Yet before he began in earnest his campaign to revive the Gaelic language and agitate for an independent Scotland, Erskine was associated with radical neo-Jacobite and Decadence circles in London. I will focus on his work as an editor and author across the 1890s, examining how he attempted to combine his Jacobitism and commitment to the Union with his emerging belief in the need for an independent Scotland. In his work establishing conservative avant-garde little magazines we can see the emergence of his idiosyncratic vision of a federation or union of independent nations on the British Isles emerge. At the fin de siècle, before the First World War and the Easter Rising, there was a dynamic, if messy, political climate in which nationalism was not wholly incompatible with a cosmopolitan world view, or with a commitment to the Union. Erskine havers between supporting Scottish home rule and advocating outright

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 19

independence, and both endorses political unionism and laments its limitations when compared to his utopian vision of a Jacobite monarchical federalism. Erskine's journalism of the 1890s is both doctrinaire and in development. Reconstructing the shifts in his ideological commitments shows us a glimpse of a radically conservative cosmopolitanism, one that is as destabilising today as it was in the late 1890s.

Erskine was born 1867 in Brighton, the third child and second son of William Macnaghten Erskine, 5<sup>th</sup> Baron Erskine. Although he was raised in the South of England, Erskine's nurse was from Harris and, he was to claim, taught him Gaelic. He was educated at Uppingham before entering journalism and politics in the early 1890s. He was a minor, if certainly very ambitious, young man of letters in literary London, establishing three periodicals across the decade and attempting to get elected to parliament. He married in 1893, yet his infant daughter tragically died in 1894 as did his young wife Muriel in 1895. In the second half of the 1890s he became ever more drawn to Scotland, studying Gaelic in earnest and publishing an "an unconventional guide book" to Braemar in 1898 and a guide to wearing the kilt in 1901. At the turn of the century, he began to publish under Ruadri (Gaelic for Roderick), later amending it to Ruaraidh. In 1904 he founded the periodical *Guth na Bliadhna* (Voice of the Year), which he edited until 1925, publishing contributions in both Gaelic and English, including Padraic Pearse. In it, Erskine offered staunch support for Irish independence and clearly militated for the same in Scotland, lamenting that the Gaelic language revival in his own country had none of the politicisation of that across the North Channel. Erskine became ever more proficient in Gaelic, and in 1909-10 he published Gaelic detective stories which featured typical *fin-de-siècle* themes.<sup>2</sup>

Erskine became a supporter of the Highland Land League and was strongly opposed to the United Kingdom's involvement in the First World War.<sup>3</sup> Through his friendship with the socialist William Gillies and association with the London Gaelic League in the years immediately after the War, he worked to develop pan-Celticism as a political movement in the capital.<sup>4</sup> His politics became more and more left-wing as he developed a friendship with John MacLean, one of the foremost Scottish revolutionary socialists, as well as an ever-closer affiliation with Sinn Féin.

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<sup>2</sup> Petra Johana Poncarová, "Snake Women and Hideous Sensations: The Strange Case of Gaelic Detective Short Stories by Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar," *Scottish Literary Review*, 12.1 (2020): 81-94.

<sup>3</sup> James Hunter, "The Gaelic Connection: The Highlands, Ireland and Nationalism, 1873-1922," *Scottish Historical Review*, 54.158 (1975): 178-204.

<sup>4</sup> Darragh Gannon, "Celticism in Exile: The London Gaelic League, 1917-1921," *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 30 (2010): 82-101.

In 1920 Erskine was influential in the re-formation of the Scots National League, which was to be folded into the National Party of Scotland in 1928, which in turn would go on to form the Scottish National Party in 1934. In the mid-1920s, Erskine turned his back on more overt political activity, and his focus shifted towards the literary revival, most famously editing the *Pictish Review* (1927–8) with Hugh MacDiarmid, who described him as “one of the most remarkable personalities of modern Scottish history, the very core and crux of the *Gaeltacht*.”<sup>5</sup> By the 1930s, Erskine had become once again a fervent monarchist, his reactionary politics now anti-democratic and anti-Semitic.<sup>6</sup>

Erskine’s life then travelled the gamut from neo-Jacobite conservatism to revolutionary socialism and back again. One of the most consistent features of his work was attempting to solve the question of whether the nations of these islands should be united in a formal political union or federation. While he flirted with republicanism, he always remained a committed Catholic and never wholly abandoned the monarchy. Political independence for Scotland was always tied to an awareness of the benefits of archipelagic fraternity, to a bond between the nations of England, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland.

Where, however, do we place Erskine’s federalism or unionism in the broader relationship between nationalism and cosmopolitanism? Stefano Evangelista has recently offered a compelling analysis of the emergence of cosmopolitanism as a keynote of *fin-de-siècle* literary culture. As Evangelista notes, we should be wary of reducing that culture to a simple binary opposition between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Empire disrupts this: the nationalism that underpinned it might have “provided an ideological justification” for the abuse and violence that were part of the imperial project, but it also “created the conditions for an unprecedented global movement of people, goods, ideas, and, crucially, writers and texts.”<sup>7</sup> Another geo-political formation that disrupts the nation-cosmopolitan binary is, arguably, Unionism, which is absent from Evangelista’s discussion, as is monarchism—arguably one of the oldest forms of cosmopolitanism. Erskine’s attempt to negotiate the union, the nation, and the cosmopolitan in the 1890s produces a dynamic, unstable politics that refuses ideological absolutes.

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<sup>5</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *Contemporary Scottish Studies*, ed. Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), 284-85.

<sup>6</sup> This potted account of Erskine’s life is largely based on the first biography of him to appear: Gerard Cairns, *No Language! No Nation! The Life and Times of the Honourable Ruaraidh Erskine of Marr* (Perth: Rymour Books, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Stefano Evangelista, *Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English Fin de Siècle: Citizens of Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 10-11.

Erskine began to sketch out his own form of nationalist unionist conservatism in his very first foray into journalism. *The Whirlwind*—"a lively and eccentric newspaper," as it was subtitled—was edited by Stuart Erskine, at the time, only 21 years old, and Herbert Vivian, then 25. What the two men lacked in publishing experience they more than made up for in youthful brashness. The periodical was published weekly from June 1890 before fizzling out in December after Erskine's father declined to bankroll it any further, following a legal battle with a printer who refused to publish what he determined a treasonous article. *The Whirlwind* was openly propagandistic and desperately wanted to be a popular success. It was published on thin newsprint paper with a distinctive masthead featuring an image of a young woman caught up in the titular whirlwind. The journal's motto was "*Chi sputa contra il vento si sputa contra il viso*," which the "editor-proprietors" translated as "He that spits against the whirlwind, spits in his own face."

The opening issue of the magazine made it clear that its inspiration was taken from Europe and was antithetical to the English fashions of the day. Where most literary and political periodicals in Britain then had ties to one of the two main political parties, the editors were keen to emulate the practice on the Continent where "every politician, with ideas out of the common rut, edits a paper of his own to represent them." Never lacking self-confidence, Vivian and Erskine declared that their attempt to "transplant" this practice to our shores" marked a new "epoch in British journalism." Where hitherto readers could only choose between "the drowsy organs of the Front Bench Mind and ephemeral expositors of obscure fads," *The Whirlwind* offered a wholly new offering. Their introductory editorial announced a bizarrely idiosyncratic programme:

In politics we shall be Individualists, instantly protesting against the encroaching tyranny of "our grandmother the state"; unswerving advocates of nationalism, peace and free trade; as well as economists, reformers, and true liberals. We are in favour of the principle of Voluntary Taxation. In a word, we propose to re-establish the old Manchester school of politics. We propose to uphold the rights and liberties of the monarchy and the multitude against the unbridled usurpations of an unscrupulous oligarchy, and we shall demand real representation for the people by frequent parliaments, proportional representation, and the *referendum*. We shall oppose vaccination and vivisection, as well as female, childhood, or doghood suffrage, hypocrisy, whiggery and waste. In history we shall be zealous legitimists and Jacobites, proclaiming the cause of true kingship.... In surveying literature and the drama we shall be *vingtième siècle*; in philosophy we shall be epicurean; our sporting articles will arouse controversy, and our chronicles of

social functions will be uniquely accurate. Our style will be breezy and terse, our audacity unprecedented.<sup>8</sup>

It is a striking whirlwind of positions. Vivian and Erskine defy any of the established ideological frameworks of the late-Victorian period, or even the twenty-first century's penchant for niche identity politics. It is capacious and narrow in equal measure, leaving no stone unturned in its attempt to carve out a particular form of reactionary traditionalism combined with progressive posturing. As a note on the journal, syndicated all over Britain and Ireland, put it: "the latest chic is the WHIRLWIND ... a paper of Jacobite principles and delightful audacity. It is *fin de Siècle* in the extreme; the vanguard of high treason."<sup>9</sup> Yet this was a treason fundamentally Monarchist in style; it was archly conservative, but also wholly cosmopolitan in its worldview. The young editors turned to France for models of artistic inspiration; while Britain may be mired in philistinism, they only had to turn their gaze across the Channel for models of aesthetic revolt:

after an era of rampant bourgeois mediocrity came Edgar Poe, so to France, after desperate academic dullness came Baudelaire, and now Stéphane Mallarmé, who has affected a revolution in the dovecotes of poetical orthodoxy.<sup>10</sup>

Through their connection with James Abbott McNeill Whistler they had solicited from Mallarmé a poem in praise of their periodical.<sup>11</sup>

As the year went on the young editors turned *The Whirlwind* into an even more overtly Jacobite paper. Unfortunately, their printer was a loyalist and refused to print the 18 October issue unless an article "A Call to Arms—I. Young England" was removed, a demand the editors staunchly refused. With some irony, the article was published under the pseudonym "Miles Corbet," the name of one of the most famous regicides who signed the death warrant of Charles I. This piece called for all Young Englanders to raise around the Royal Standard of England with white favours on their chests and white cockades in their hats. Young England was, in fact, "old England, merry England, devout England, the England that would have been had not the stream of her national life been dammed by a cursed revolution." Now was time to gather around the "holy lamp of legitimate monarchy" and "restore it to its place." The call to arms concluded with an optimistic vision of a future England freed from

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<sup>8</sup> Stuart Erskine and Herbert Vivian, "Introductory," *The Whirlwind: A Lively and Eccentric Newspaper*, 1.1 (28 June 1890): 1.

<sup>9</sup> "Our London Letter," *Cork Constitution* (23 October 1890): 5.

<sup>10</sup> Herbert Vivian, "Brouhaha," *The Whirlwind*, 2.20 (15 November 1890): 98.

<sup>11</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, "Whirlwind," *The Whirlwind*, 2.20 (15 November 1890): 104.

Hanoverian tyranny: “it is July 19— and all the land is in jubilation.” The date is now known as “Restoration Day,” and crowds stream towards Dover to welcome the legitimate King and Queen, where the abject members of the family of Guelph, dressed in mourning clothes, offer penance for their centuries of treason. The vignette concludes: “The summer sun smiles down on a glad and regenerate England,—all have sworn an oath that it shall stand still ere treason infect our land again.”<sup>12</sup>

That article would be followed, in subsequent issues, by a similar “Call to Arms” to Young Scotland and Young Ireland. The Mission of Young Scotland was to

restore loyalty, to exterminate the canting brood of John Knox, to hang up by the heels all huckstering Glasgow bodies, to infuse a little sense and dignity into the Scottish Radical, to wean all Scotsmen from their crooked fancy for the Member for Midlothian [Gladstone], to subjugate the Lowlands to the Highlands, and, if possible, to instil into the crass commercial South a grain or two of the spirit of the valiant, loyal North, and generally to do all that maybe done, in an about the Kingdom, to aid in the rapid restoration of the exiled Queen.”<sup>13</sup>

In the same issue as the “Call” to Young Scotland was an article signed by Erskine which made clear his support for Scottish Home Rule. Rather than allowing the conservative press of England to declare there was no popular demand for Home Rule it was high time that this was put to the people:

How long the Englishman is to dictate to the Scotsman is for the Scotsman to decide. How long the Englishman is to be permitted to trample upon the natural rights of Scotland remains not so much with Mr Gladstone and his Scottish constituents as with the bulk of the people. In their hands rests the destiny of the country.<sup>14</sup>

Self-determination for Scotland was to be a cause that Erskine would pursue for the rest of his life.

The Call to Arms for Young Ireland required some tricky polemical manoeuvring: when Young Ireland was clearly fired by republican sentiment it was difficult to encourage them to return to the Jacobite cause that had lain dormant there for more than a hundred years. Yet, “Miles Corbet” argued, the republic could only be a prelude to a return to monarchy, and if Young Ireland could stand under the sign of Queen,

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<sup>12</sup> Miles Corbet, “A Call to Arms—I. Young England,” *The Whirlwind*, 2. 17 (25 October 1890): 50.

<sup>13</sup> Miles Corbet, “A Call to Arms—II. Young Scotland,” *The Whirlwind*, 2. 18 (1 November 1890): 67.

<sup>14</sup> Stuart Erskine, “Home Rule for Scotland,” *The Whirlwind* 2. 18 (1 November 1890): 66.

Church, and Republic, her freedom from English tyranny would be assured:

Come with me then, sons of Ireland, to the National Standard that is waving on the Royal Hill of Tara, on the Curragh of Kildare, on the Rath of Mullaghmast, on every and whatsoever spot of your fair isle that is dear and sacred to you. Come join an Irish Republican Brotherhood that is without stain or reproach.<sup>15</sup>

The calls in *The Whirlwind* for England for the return of a Stuart to the throne, and for Scotland and Ireland to embrace Nationalist traditions so as to liberate themselves from the Hanoverian United Kingdom before swearing fealty to a new Stuart monarch in a newly United Kingdom, were outlandish. This was Home Rule as a preparation for the return of absolute monarchy.

Erskine's next statement on the necessity of Scottish independence came in 1892 in *The Albermarle Review*, a short-lived periodical edited by the unlikely pairing of Decadent-Realist short story writer, Hubert Crackanthorpe, and the royal historian, novelist, conservative activist, and anti-migrant bigot William Henry Wilkins. On the moral right of the country, of any country, to self-determination Erskine was unequivocal:

In spite of custom, and the threatenings of tyranny, usurpation and injustice, the right of Scotland, and of all nations, to exercise an absolute discretion in the management of their own affairs must ultimately prevail.<sup>16</sup>

It is, however, of some significance that the two authorities Erskine cited in support of independence were two of the greatest figures in the British conservative tradition: Lord Bolingbroke and Edmund Burke. He even closed his article with the same quotation from Horace's *Odes* that Burke had used in his speech on *Conciliation with America* (1775). Scottish independence was to be argued for using the Tory valorisation of constitutional monarchy.

After the disappointment of *The Whirlwind* folding, Erskine turned to politics, attempting to become a Liberal Candidate for Buteshire. His candidacy was opposed vociferously by the local Liberal Association on the grounds that Erskine had been an avowed Conservative. He attempted to convince his opponents that he had now signed up to Gladstone's Newcastle programme and made "Scottish Home Rule the principal feature

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<sup>15</sup> Miles Corbet, "A Call To Arms. III.— Young Ireland," *The Whirlwind*, 2.19 (8 November 1890): 82-3.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart Erskine, "The Independency of Scotland," *The Albermarle* (March 1892): 102.



of his political faith.<sup>17</sup> Suffice to say they were not very convinced. The next year Erskine returned to journalism, editing the short-lived *The Houyhnhnm: A Journal for Yahoos*, which took aim at what seemed to him the increasing philistinism of British cultural life. In particular, he attacked the rising tide of nationalism which “reminds one forcibly that the vermin called Jingoism is not yet sufficiently knocked on the head.” It was the response to Gladstone’s Second Home Rule Bill in February that had led to this upsurge in jingoism. Erskine was by now a fervent proponent of Home Rule and professed that the “true sort” of Unionism was “JUSTICE to Ireland.”<sup>18</sup>

Erskine’s desire to further promote his conservative Home Rule views saw him establish the following year his third little magazine of the 1890s. *The Senate*, a monthly journal (May 1894-December 1897), attempted to fuse the principles and practices of French Symbolism and Decadence with classic British conservative thought.<sup>19</sup> The opening editorial announced the need to save Britain from itself:

Unhappy Britannia, whose cotton stockings of coarse parochialism gleam through the subtle draperies of misty Gladstonese, is forced to dance shamelessly, madly, and with abandon, while the assembled nations roar at her indecent constitutional somersaults, and do ample justice to the low comedy of English politics. Even the Union Jack, that once so chastely robed her, is being torn off her back, leaving her exposed to the continual draughts of continental scene-shifting.<sup>20</sup>

While this might seem like overt British nationalism, the source of rejuvenation for the editors of *The Senate* was France, and the principles of artistic individualism that were embodied in the person of Paul Verlaine. What Albion needed was less English buffoonery and naked capitalism and more artistic integrity. So the neo-Jacobite conservative Scottish nationalist looked to France for cultural inspiration and to Archduchess Maria Theresa of Austria-Este, Queen Consort of Bavaria, to be the new monarch of newly independent England, Scotland and Ireland (poor Wales doesn’t get much of a look-in), while supporting other legitimist causes across Europe. At the same time he also argued that embracing Roman Catholicism would

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<sup>17</sup> “Mr Stuart Erskine and the Representation of Buteshire,” *Glasgow Herald* (22 April 1892): 6.

<sup>18</sup> “The Revival of Jingoism,” *The Houyhnhnm: A Journal for Yahoos*, 1:5 (June 1893): 73.

<sup>19</sup> See Alex Murray, “Decadent Conservatism: Politics and Aesthetics in *The Senate*,” *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 20. 2 (2015): 186-211

<sup>20</sup> Launcelot Cranmer-Byng and Stuart Erskine, “Senatus, Populusque Britannicus,” *The Senate*, 1.1 (May 1894): 1.

help Scotland free itself from the yoke of England and from its own puritanical tendencies.

Over the course of the 1890s, Erskine's interest in Jacobitism became ever stronger. In 1896 he edited *The Earl of Mar's Legacies to Scotland and to his son, Lord Erskine, 1722-1727* for the Scottish History Society. John Erskine, 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Mar (1675–1732), was prominent in the Jacobite uprising of 1715, yet had been much maligned in Scottish history, his strategic shifts in political commitment (Whig, Tory, Jacobite, Hanoverian) earning him the sobriquet “Bobbing John.”<sup>21</sup> While Erskine's introduction and notes to the volume were a work of sombre (if perhaps biased) historiography, in a contemporaneous article he makes it clear that the 6<sup>th</sup> Earl offered his fin-de-siècle readers some instruction. Coming soon after the failure of Gladstone's Second Home Rule Bill, Erskine christened a small extract of the *Legacies* “Lord Mar's Home Rule Bill,” which he published with a commentary in *The Dublin Review* in 1895. Erskine highlighted in particular Mar's prescient calls for religious toleration, the repeal of all Sacramental Test Acts, and the ever-closer union between Scotland and Ireland. The only points on which he demurred from Mar were the regulation of industry and agriculture, which Erskine dismissed as “shocking economic heresies” that smacked of the worst excesses of fin-de-siècle socialists.<sup>22</sup>

In 1898 Erskine published his one and only novel in English. *Lord Dullborough: A Sketch* is in many ways a typical fin-de-siècle affair, a potted biography by a Scottish narrator of the titular figure who is a raffish neo-Jacobite Tory. The young peer is an amusing mixture of the Decadent and the radical reactionary, and the novel is a vehicle for Erskine's politics. Dullborough advocates a complete renovation of the UK constitution, the chief planks being: “the Repeal of the Act of Settlement and the abrogation of all religious disabilities affecting the Crown; the Federation of the Empire” whereby there are separate parliaments for England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, the crown colonies, and other dependencies, and, most outlandishly, “the conquest of the United States of North America, which Gilbert declared still belonged to the Crown, though during a period of usurpation, the Elector of Hanover, George III., had had the unspeakable

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<sup>21</sup> *The Earl of Mar's Legacies to Scotland and to his son, Lord Erskine, 1722-1727. Edited from the Original MS. at Alloa House, With a Biographical Introduction and Notes by the Hon. Stuart Erskine* (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society Publications, vol. 26, 1896),

<sup>22</sup> Stuart Erskine, “Art. VII Lord Mar's Home Rule Bill,” *Dublin Review*, (October 1894): 386.

folly and audacity to lose us them.”<sup>23</sup> Our narrator is a little less radical, “Without wishing to undo the Union,” he feels “it is a pity that our forefathers when they undertook the affair of a union between the two countries of England and Scotland did not settle it in such a manner as ... might have contributed a little more to the ease and dignity of my own country”. The subordinate position of Scotland in the relationship, he feels, is holding the country back, and so he advocates for a devolved Scottish parliament both to realise potential and to regain pride.<sup>24</sup>

In many ways Erskine ended the 1890s uncertain as to whether Home Rule was enough for Scotland, or whether it required a much more extreme form of federalism. In the background is the question whether a truly new political settlement could ever be established on neo-Jacobite lines. Erskine, like all late-Victorian neo-Jacobites, had inherited a pallid version of the '45 as it had been renovated by Sir Walter Scott and others till it was, as Colin Kidd memorably characterises it, “a mannequin of the original, without the marrow.”<sup>25</sup> Yet in thinking through how an independent Scotland, with the Gaelic language at its heart, might feature in part of a reconstituted Stuart Federation, Erskine was outlining a radical new vision of an old politics. It was one that didn't embrace nativism, and that sought political equality amongst the nations of these islands, while being inspired by the art and ideals of continental Europe. It is, I concede, a strange form of cosmopolitanism, but one that still offers today a pointed challenge to the rhetoric of nationalisms.

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<sup>23</sup> Stuart Erskine, *Lord Dullborough: A Sketch* (Bristol: J.W. Arrowsmith, 1898), 115-6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-23.

<sup>25</sup> Colin Kidd, “The Rehabilitation of Scottish Jacobitism,” *Scottish Historical Review*, 77.203 (1998): 76.