

Institution: University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI)		
Unit of Assessment: 28		
Title of case study: Inspiring the 'Spirit of the Highlands': how collaborative research on historical agency is assisting transformative regional cultural practice		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Jim MacPherson	Senior Lecturer	2011 to date
David Worthington	Professor	2008 to date
James Hunter	Senior Researcher	2005-2011 and 2019 to date
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The Scottish Highlands has for centuries been a culturally-rich and internationally-connected region, but since the 1700s it has been more frequently characterised as peripheral. Research from the Centre for History (CfH) at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) has challenged this characterisation, emphasising instead human agency: the vitality and resilience, sometimes against the odds, of the region's social and linguistic communities. This research has then helped change cultural practice in the Highland Council locality, the largest local government area in the U.K. High Life Highland (HLH), the partner for the case study, is a service delivery organisation providing cultural, leisure, and learning services on behalf of the Council. HLH has incorporated this new understanding from our research in its approach to its museums, libraries, and archives. CfH research has underpinned several collaborative projects with HLH since 2015, and influenced the concept and application of the 'Spirit of the Highlands', the organising principle for the multi-million pound Inverness Castle Project, the biggest single heritage development in the region of the last century.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The underpinning research has been carried out in public and regional history by Hunter, Worthington, and, in particular, MacPherson. It focuses on and contextualises the agency of the region's often marginalised communities [3.1].</p> <p>The Centre for History (CfH) has developed an approach to collaborative research which emphasises the historical resilience of the Highland people and the ways in which this can effect positively on cultural, social, and economic development. This agency has too often been overlooked in accounts which focus on the long-lasting, destructive aftermath of the Battle of Culloden, on the Highland Clearances, and on emigration. Hunter has argued that an appreciation of the Highlands' rich and diverse history over the longer term is essential if people in the region are to have a sustainable future [3.2]. Worthington has formulated an historiographical approach that responds to the varied work of scholars including Rod Aya, Walter Johnson, and Jon Wilson since the 1990s, all of whom have used 'agency' as an umbrella term to describe collective responses among marginalised communities. Worthington has applied this to show how cultural and social influences have travelled southwards from the northern, 'Highland' littoral of the Moray Firth to its southern, 'Lowland' edge, as much as vice versa, reversing most previous assumptions [3.3]. The work of MacPherson takes direct inspiration from Hunter's pivotal re-evaluation of Highland communities and applies these concepts of agency to collaborative research which empowers those same communities to effect social, economic, and cultural change. MacPherson has pioneered a collaborative mode of PhD supervision and research which has put into place a practice-based philosophy that is unique in a sub-national context in Scotland [3.1]. Drawing on elements of postcolonial thought, it is based</p>		

on principles of public history that give power to local people, enabling them to become agents in the creation of knowledge.

A bridge towards the impact that has occurred was the awarding of an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award funded studentship, Badenoch Textiles, led by MacPherson, and founded on the research principles described above. This saw co-production of CfH research with an HLH-run museum, the Highland Folk Museum (HFM). The project highlighted the importance of flax growing to the Highland economy and the region's place within global and imperial commercial markets and intellectual culture in the eighteenth century. By using eighteenth-century techniques for flax growth and production, it explored how a 'learning by doing' approach could help HFM to become involved in the research process and drive forward their public engagement activities both at regional and national level.

3. References to the research

- 3.1. Jim MacPherson, 'History writing and agency in the Scottish Highlands: postcolonial thought, the work of James Macpherson (1736-1796) and researching the region's past with local communities', *Northern Scotland*, 11:2, (2020), pp. 123-38.
- 3.2. James Hunter, 'History: its key place in the future of the Highlands and Islands', *Northern Scotland*, 27:1, (2007), pp. 1-14.
- 3.3. David Worthington, 'The settlements of the Beaulieu-Wick coast and the historiography of the Moray Firth', *The Scottish Historical Review*, 95:2, (2016), pp. 139-63.

4. Details of the impact

Distilling the 'Spirit of the Highlands' with High Life Highland since 2015

After centuries of being marginalised, the Highlands has begun to experience some signs of cultural revival, in which the Centre for History and High Life Highland's collaborations have been vital. The CfH's research on Highland agency influencing the approach and activities of HLH via a chain of interlocking events initiated at the Kingussie Heritage Festival of 2015: the abovementioned Badenoch Textiles project, which started later that year, and its outcomes, along with a range of interconnecting influence on cultural practice in Highland museums, libraries and archives. Assisted by this, a new concept – the 'Spirit of the Highlands' – is today manifested in the form of the Inverness Castle Project. In the words of the Head of Service at HLH until 2019: "*History is about people, their actions, and their responses: their 'agency' if you like, this being a term that Centre for History researchers have used in showing the vitality of Highland communities in the past. And in the Highlands, this is a magnificent and uplifting story that also has a present and a future. For me, this is what the 'Spirit of the Highlands' encapsulates*" [5.1].

By working with HLH, an organisation with nearly 800 full- and part-time staff as of early 2020, the CfH has fulfilled a shared aim of making co-produced academic research more accessible to the general public, and of placing the region's collective agency and 'spirit' to the fore to ensure cultural renewal. Senior managers at HLH's museums, libraries and archives – the Highland Folk Museum, Inverness Library, and Highland Archive Centre, in particular – have prioritised the benefits that have accrued from practice-based partnerships with us since 2015, as will be shown. This has altered HLH's approach to their cultural assets and helped them embed local cultural facilities into their communities. It has also supported closer connections between them and national cultural institutions.

Oil, putty and paint: a flagship study of how CfH research gave a national platform to cultural practice in a regional organisation

CfH collaborative work with HLH commenced at the Kingussie Heritage Festival in 2015, an event which brought together local heritage bodies, including the Clan Macpherson Museum. The presentation of research concepts via community-focused public history was attended by HLH's Head of Service and the CfH's MacPherson, who identified common ground. Discussions between them and others present inspired a strategic partnership between HLH and UHI and new collaborations between HLH and both Historic Environment Scotland (HES) and the

National Library of Scotland (NLS). The Badenoch Textiles project, which emerged from the Kingussie discussions – and for which MacPherson was Director of Studies – allowed for firmer connections to be made between HLH and these national bodies. First, it helped HLH “*expand and deepen our relationship with Historic Environment Scotland*” according to their Curatorial Manager at the time [5.4, p.1]. The doctoral research, based at the Highland Folk Museum (HFM), led to the museum and a researcher being funded to cultivate and harvest flax using eighteenth-century techniques. This was of great interest to the technical branch of Historic Environment Scotland (HES), which has a strong sustainability agenda built, in part, around increasing the use of traditional building materials. Indeed, they had a key objective of experimenting in the production and use of traditional, non-lead-based paint from linseed oil, which is produced from flax. Inspired by the flax project’s research, which the key member of HES’s technical research team involved considered an essential “*academic stepping stone*” for them [5.3, p.9], they produced linseed oil from two annual harvests of the flax. One batch went to the Engine Shed, Scotland’s dedicated building conservation centre, which emphasises training and education, while HES turned a second batch into putty and paint for The Ridge charity in Dunbar [5.3]. This community interest company, which works with socially-excluded groups to offer them skills training, acquired a derelict complex of eighteenth-century buildings which they are rebuilding in partnership with HES. The output of CfH research, in the form of putty and paint, was used in the restoration of the windows [5.3].

Inspiring HLH’s approach to the region’s ‘spirit’: museums, libraries and archives

From there, our research helped inspire new collaborations linking the communities of Badenoch, the CfH, and the Highland Folk Museum (HFM). According to the HLH Curatorial Manager at the time, it expanded the range and depth of HLH’s working practices, the ways it communicates with the public, and its collaboration with external agencies. While embedding doctoral research in the curatorial work of museums is common practice at national-level institutions, such an approach has had limited application at regional or local levels. But the former Curatorial Manager considered that the CfH’s work showed a capacity “*for bringing research to bear on contemporary issues*” [5.4, p.1]. In much the same way that Historic Environment Scotland used the material outcomes of CfH practice-led research with socially excluded groups, HFM developed aims of establishing “*a centre for learning and teaching ... of traditional rural skills*” [5.5, p.17] that would empower marginalised people, bringing the museum also additional income, employment, and further research opportunities [5.4, 5.5]. Enhanced confidence and dedicated work by the HFM staff brought recognition of the museum as ‘nationally significant’ by Museums & Galleries Scotland (MGS). This was followed by a successful application to MGS for a grant, invested in two HFM staff to undertake work on conservation and documentation, a focus apparent also in the museum’s ‘20 Year Vision’ statement in 2016, in which collaborative research with universities rose to the fore. A shift in practice had occurred, from cataloguing to research, that, as the then-HLH Head of Service stated, had “*in part come out of the partnership we have had with the university*” [5.6, p.11].

Moving beyond the HFM, as a result of working with CfH, senior managers at HLH had also authorised the loan of the Inverness Library collection of rare books written by James Macpherson (1736-1796) to the 2015 Festival in Kingussie, allowing the people of Badenoch to engage intellectually and physically with these works in ways that they had not done before. Here too, CfH research on Highland agency had a transformative effect on staff and institutional attitudes, engaging them with an eighteenth-century, local author, James Macpherson, who is of global significance. This demonstrated the cultural value of HLH’s collections and drove HLH’s strengthening relations with another national organisation, in this case the National Library of Scotland (NLS). According to the current Head of Culture at HLH, special collections are “*an absolute headache and a nightmare for public libraries*” [5.5, p.1]. This situation was transformed for them, however, by the CfH’s research, which revealed to senior library managers the value of bringing the special collections to the public. It involved ‘Meet the Books’ events run by CfH staff in collaboration with other UHI researchers, which attracted capacity attendances, excellent feedback, and enhanced senior managers’ understanding of the collections [5.5]. CfH-led collaborative research was, HLH’s Head of Culture asserts, “*giving me real food for thought about how in future we can facilitate/publicise the whole process again*” [5.5, p.4]. Such new-

found awareness of the latent power of Inverness Library's special collections took HLH's cultural services in three directions. Firstly, it led to the idea of a 'centre for the book', which they would propose as part of the Inverness Castle Project (see below) and which could integrate academic and "*public learning; teaching; public engagement*" [5.5]. The second direction was to draw library staff and volunteers further into the research process through staff development sessions, creating "*a new model*" that "*can be replicated throughout our entire cultural [provision] right across the Highlands*" [5.5, p.14]. Thirdly, CfH research strengthened the relationship between Highland library services and the National Library of Scotland (NLS), raising awareness of the significance of their special collections, with the NLS confirming to HLH that their social and historical context made them particularly precious [5.5].

Another HLH priority is the Highland Archive Centre (HAC), with whom the CfH ran five collaborative events between 2017 and 2020. On three occasions, these were accompanied by exhibitions of archival material which had been used in our recent publications, towards inspiring further collaborative research. First, in March 2017, CfH staff co-organised, along with the Imperial War Museum, 'Researching the Impact of the First World War on the Highlands and Islands', an event at which CfH and HAC staff both presented along with numerous other national and local historians and archivists; there was a lunchtime exhibition at HAC of relevant holdings, while two major follow-ups would take place, one at HAC and the other in Lewis. The second occasion relates to the archival collections of the Caledonian Societies of Kenya and Zanzibar, donated by a CfH alumnus in 2013, and the focus of a 2017 display at HAC held in conjunction with an introduction to the archives for the public and a lecture on Scotland's Imperial past and relevant records in the archive by CfH visiting professor, John MacKenzie. The third occasion was a sold-out book launch and lecture in Inverness Town House for a 2019 work by Professor Hunter, chaired by Worthington, and at which material from HAC that Hunter had used in his research was, similarly, displayed. As the Highland Archivist at HAC states: "*On each occasion, these collaborations have given us the opportunity to share our archives with new audiences ... The partnership with the UHI Centre for History is one which we greatly value as it enables us to promote, publicise, and grow engagement with the archives in our care.*" Furthermore, as she expresses it, the CfH's research "*plays a vital role in highlighting the spirit of the Highlands and the lives of the people who call, and have called, this area home*" [5.7].

Manifesting the 'Spirit of the Highlands': the Inverness Castle Project

Ultimately, and through the concept of the 'Spirit of the Highlands', our research has led to the CfH taking up a vital role, alongside HLH, in the largest, most expensive cultural project ever undertaken in the Highlands: the Inverness Castle Project. This is a collaboration that has been supported at the highest strategic level of the partner organisation, embracing academic research by university-based academics. As HLH's former Head of Service expressed it, the "*symbiotic relationship*" [5.2, p.3] with UHI's research was a backdrop to the 'Officers Group' of the Castle Project after 2015, as they came up with a 'hook' that would bring in the region's stories and ensure the political support to be obtained. This hook was the 'Spirit of the Highlands', a concept now central to the Castle Project [5.2].

CfH research, and its application to working with the region's museums, libraries, and archives since 2015, has helped convince HLH of the need for a new, research-led cultural approach. This new vision for the organisation is visible today in the Castle Project. The project forms part of the Inverness and Highland City-Region deal, which is now in full progress, and which will see up to £315 million investment from the UK and Scottish governments aimed at stimulating sustainable economic growth regionally, with £15 million of this going directly to Castle Hill. The Castle Project is creating a gateway for tourism and becoming an anchor for economic growth in the city and throughout the region, and the content for the attraction thereby created celebrates, above all, the 'Spirit of the Highlands' [5.8]. The project runs over three phases: Phase One involves the development of the North and South tower of the current Castle; Phase Two envisages the building of a new, adjacent visitor attraction on Castle Hill to an international standard; Phase Three is the commercial aspect. The net result is intended to be "*a large cultural hub in the centre of Inverness which ... will lead down to the archive centre, to the library, cultural trails*" [5.5, p.9].

CfH research has had a significant physical impact on Castle Hill already, with Worthington acting as one of two historical consultants for the bilingual English and Gaelic text on the Castle hoardings, which went on display on the current exterior in September 2020. The narrative for the hoardings focuses on a fictional character, Flora, a young girl, and her enthusiasm for the Castle's and the Highlands' past. The involvement of Worthington comes in part from a 2019 Scottish Graduate School for the Arts and Humanities-funded workshop he organised. At this event, HLH's Head of Culture highlighted to the audience – including senior curatorial staff at National Museums Scotland – the inspiration provided to the project by UHI research. The newly-appointed Creative Director of the Castle Project also talked about the historical elements of the development, emphasising the importance of the CfH's and broader UHI research practices as the 'Spirit of the Highlands' began to materialise [5.9]. This influence is further evidenced by Worthington representing UHI on the Inverness Castle Project Delivery Group, chaired by the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism, Fergus Ewing MSP. Moreover, Worthington's leadership of the UHI-HLH advisory group to the project, established in 2018, distributes agency further, focusing on how the CfH's community-oriented research can be applied in a wider, cross-disciplinary way.

CfH researchers have positioned their work as a fulcrum around which relations between the Castle Project team and the university hinges, challenging the entrenched opinion that the marginalisation of the region and its voices is irreversible. Finally, in this regard, the 'Spirit of the Highlands' is involving HLH's gathering and curation of at least 100 'stories' from across the region, a process launched online in September 2020, with a video narrated by multi-award winning Gaelic singer and composer, Julie Fowlis. Fowlis affirmed, shortly after, that *"historical research at UHI has been an inspiration to me as an artist in recent times, particularly through their work showing the strength, agency and spirit of Highland people, past and present"*. Soon after, Fergus Ewing MSP asserted that *"the involvement of the UHI, and in particular its Centre for History, has already brought huge benefits to this project in helping research and display the 'Spirit of the Highlands' stories"* [5.10]. The stories will provide the content for the visitor attraction on Castle Hill and the CfH will take a significant role in their selection. In this way, our research continues to inspire the 'Spirit of the Highlands', helping it materialise as the framework for a project that is having tangible, transformative effects on the region's cultural life, on a scale bigger than that of any other development of the last century.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1. Graham Watson, 'Spirit of the Highlands', blogpost: <https://firthsandfjords.com/2020/06/25/the-spirit-of-the-highlands/>
- 5.2. Second Interview with Dr Graham Watson, Head of Service (until 2019), High Life Highland, 14 April 2020.
- 5.3. Interview with Roger Curtis/Anne Schmidt, Technical Research Team, Historic Environment Scotland.
- 5.4. Interview with Dr Matthew Withey, Curatorial Manager (until 2020), High Life Highland.
- 5.5. Interview with John West, Head of Culture, High Life Highland.
- 5.6. First Interview with Dr Graham Watson, 6 September 2019.
- 5.7. Email from Alison Mason, Highland Archivist, Highland Archive Centre, 16 April 2020.
- 5.8. Highland Council press release, 20 February 2020.
- 5.9. 'Universities, Heritage Bodies and Scotland's Regional Pasts', Scottish Graduate School for the Arts and Humanities, Training Event Report, 2019.
- 5.10a. Email from Julie Fowlis, 11 December 2020; 5.10b. Email (quoting Fergus Ewing MSP) from Duncan Mackay, Tourism and Major Events, Scottish Government, 30 December 2020.