



Romanticism on the Net

John Galt and the Horizons of the Firth of Clyde

Gerard Lee McKeever
University of Edinburgh

Abstract

This article discusses the cultural geography developed by John Galt across several decades in his writing, from his travel writing in the early 1810s, through his 1820s fiction, to his autobiographies and North American novels in the 1830s. At the centre of this are Galt's influential accounts of the southern side of the Firth of Clyde in the 1820s, described here in terms of a dialectical regionalism that is rarefied under the pressure of migration and mobility. Place, in this context, is a social text brought into being by the negotiation of its horizons. The article situates Galt's attention to this coastal region of Scotland—in and beyond his “Tales of the West”—within British imperial, European, and transatlantic contexts, while examining the early nineteenth century's culture of literary home-longing. Despite continuities with his earlier writing, Galt's best-known work reflects a distinctively 1820s cultural watershed, suffused as it is by ethnographic and autoethnographic versions of regional difference. In fact, Galt's system of local-global attachment potentially relegates the nation to subordinate status, so that “Scotland” where it appears presents a synecdoche for a portion of the western seaboard, rather than the other way around. As it progresses, the article brings Galt's development of home-longing into dialogue with his active colonialism, concluding that this marks the sharp horizons of sympathy, and the unequal power relations, in this version of literary belonging.

Biographical Note

Gerard Lee McKeever is Lecturer in Modern Scottish Literature at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of *Dialectics of Improvement: Scottish Romanticism, 1786–1831* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), which won the BARS First Book Prize 2021. He is currently finishing a monograph titled *Regional Romanticism: Literature and Southwest Scotland, c. 1770–1830* for Palgrave Macmillan; and editing *The Autobiography and Literary Life of John Galt* for Edinburgh University Press in Angela Esterhammer's Edinburgh Edition of the Works of John Galt series.

1. In the climactic passage of his *Autobiography*, John Galt recalls April 23, 1827, the day he founded the city of Guelph in the Province of Upper Canada. It goes like this. Galt and his

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companion William “Tiger” Dunlop initially lose their way in the forest, before being set right by a land-speculating Dutch cobbler who is also a veteran of the French army and has settled in the woods. They then reach “the spot” as marked by “a shanty, which an Indian, who had committed murder, had raised as a refuge for himself.” Maintaining this dioramic sense of history, Galt writes:

It was consistent with my plan to invest our ceremony with a little mystery, the better to make it be remembered. So intimating that the main body of the men were not to come, we walked to the brow of the neighbouring rising ground, and Mr. Prior having shewn the site selected for the town, a large maple tree was chosen; on which, taking an axe from one of the woodmen, I struck the first stroke. To me at least the moment was impressive,—and the silence of the woods, that echoed to the sound, was as the sigh of the solemn genius of the wilderness departing for ever. (2: 57–59)

Galt makes himself at once stage director, master pioneer and sentimental critic here. This ironic layering of perspectives continues when the “sublimity” of his incursion upon “ancient Nature” is quickly diluted in “a flask of whisky” (2: 59). Still, the “works being on a great scale,” they have soon become general “objects of curiosity.” “I certainly did indulge myself in the rapidity of creation,” Galt reports, having on one occasion “desired the woodmen to open one of the projected streets” for the amazement of onlookers: “they effected a clearing, greater than the avenue in Kensington Gardens, the trees much larger, in an hour and ten minutes.” Similarly, he writes that “A Yankee post-boy who once drove me to Guelph, on emerging from the dark and savage wood, looked behind in astonishment

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as we entered the opening, and clapping his hands with delight, exclaimed ‘What an Almighty place!’” (2: 90).

2. Lying some 350 miles from the Atlantic Ocean, Guelph might seem like a strange place to begin a coastal enquiry. Yet Galt explained his choice of “the spot” by noting a navigable route from the river Speed into the Grand River, through the Welland and Rideau canals via Lake Ontario, along the Grand Ottawa and St. Lawrence rivers, following the Lachine canal to Montreal “and thence to the ocean, advantages which few inland towns in the whole world can boast of” (*Autobiography 2*: 60; fig. 1).



Fig. 1. James Wyld, “A map of the Province of Upper Canada” (London, 1836). Reproduction courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map and Education Center at the Boston Public Library. Edited to illustrate Galt’s description of navigable waters from Guelph to the Atlantic Ocean.

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In addition to this attractive situation, Galt's self-consciously mythical deforestation was, he claimed, a way to inspire potential settlers with a necessary reverence for the place. In his words, these spectacular works "brought 'to home' the wandering emigrants, gave them employment, and by the wonder at their greatness, magnified the importance of the improvements." Galt sought, in other words, to leaven Guelph's material advantages with a force of imaginative attachment ("wonder") in an episode that he represents as a pinnacle of his own achievements both creative and commercial. "This gigantic vision did not cost much more than the publication of a novel," he explains, underlining his prudential colonial management with direct reference to the book trade (*Autobiography 2*: 91). The *Autobiography's* account of literal place-making, clearing avenues of perspective in the forest, thus bears some comparison with the cultural geography Galt developed across several decades in his writing. More specifically, it speaks to the distinctive brand of dialectical regionalism Galt built a reputation with in the 1820s. In this regard, the story of Guelph looks back across the Atlantic to Galt's heartland of the Firth of Clyde.

3. Like most authors of the early nineteenth century, Galt's output was miscellaneous: in a geographical sense, it ranges from the west of Scotland novels that made him a literary celebrity, to fictional and nonfictional accounts of continental Europe, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and North America, the last rooted in his firsthand experience of settler colonialism as the animating spirit behind, and the first superintendent of, the Canada Company. The view of Galt as an exemplary Scottish regional novelist, one centring above all on 1821's *Annals of the Parish*, has generally remained dominant in Britain, but the legacy of his colonial activity in Canada has provoked different approaches from scholars

in North America.¹ Following the example set by Katie Trumpener in her landmark study *Bardic Nationalism* (1997), Matthew Wickman, Juliet Shields, Kenneth McNeil and Josephine McDonagh have all lately drawn attention to Galt's transatlanticism and transnationalism—Wickman, for instance, describes “a constitutionally unsettled and self-undoing globality” (Wickman 153; see also Hewitt, *John Galt*). Galt's popular brand of regionalism should not be attenuated as an element of this picture. Trumpener writes in a more recent piece that Galt's series of *regional* “‘Tales of the West’ provides a cumulative, complex account of *Scotland's* history in the context of empire” (“Annals” 49; emphasis added). Galt's work invites that telling slippage between region and nation to the extent that it associates the history of modernisation (“improvement”) with nation-building processes of cultural and material assimilation. But at the same time, Galt develops a Clyde regionalism that is rarefied under pressure, focusing on a space encompassed by an elliptical stretch of coastline on the southern side of the Firth, wrapping around from Glasgow through Renfrewshire and Ayrshire, with its nuclei, for him, in the coastal towns of Greenock and Irvine (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. A detail from “Scotland,” drawn by James Wyld, engraved by N. R. Hewitt, in *A General Atlas, containing Maps illustrating some important periods in Ancient History and distinct Maps of the Several Empires, Kingdoms and States in the World* (Edinburgh: John Thomson, 1819). Reproduced with permission of the National Library of Scotland. Edited to highlight the coastline seaward from the tidal weir in Glasgow.

4. A unified understanding of Galt’s oeuvre is not necessarily possible or desirable. Still, this new wave of Galt scholarship is encouraging in its attempt to bridge formerly isolated elements: McDonagh, for example, puts the novelist’s ear for regional dialects alongside his nonfictional writings about “colonization” (Galt’s favoured term). The present article furthers that goal by examining through lines in Galt’s cultural geography, moving from his travel writing in the early 1810s, through his 1820s fiction, to his autobiographies and North American novels in the 1830s. Crucially, Galt’s address to a coastal portion of the west of Scotland provided an essential fixture of a culture of literary home-longing that reached to ascendancy in the 1820s. This was a cultural moment dominated by Walter Scott’s historical romances and by *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, both of which developed an ethnographic and autoethnographic idiom concerned with artful

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representations of local colour—a precursor of the “thick description” defined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz as a rendering of the specificity of “shaped behavior” in a time and place (10).

5. Scottish varieties of literary home-longing—what might be called the “hame” topos—are so prevalent in this period that they are essential to any notion of “Scottish Romanticism,” certainly in light of a coastal perspective on what was increasingly an era of mobility and migration. This cultural paradigm speaks to the history of “nostalgia,” which has been recently much attended to (Austin; Goodman; Boym; and on the Scottish context, McKeever, “Extreme Attachment”). Originally designating a serious medical disorder—homesickness—nostalgia was slowly transformed into its modern, sentimental form across the nineteenth century. Still, in these early decades of the century, it remained primarily a question of place (home) rather than time (the past), albeit those categories were often inseparable. There can be little doubt that the creative figuring of origins by a Scottish literary culture aware of Scots’ international mobility and the growing Scottish diaspora played a role in normalising nostalgia as an aspect of the culture of modernity. In Galt’s case, as more generally, nostalgic local attachments were deeply integrated into a British, European, and transatlantic sense of place. At the same time, however, one of the strong characteristics of Galt’s oeuvre is a vein of commercial opportunism, in texts that are full of the author’s own entrepreneurial interests. Reflecting on what it meant to come from and experience the Firth of Clyde in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Galt’s coastal imaginary is predicated in absence and adventurism, with an anchoring

weight of local attachment—not to mention the fragile horizons of sympathy—grown indivisible from the project of empire.

Wartime Schemes and Looted Antiquities

6. Several decades before his titanic “improvements” to the Canadian “wilderness,” Galt undertook an extended Mediterranean tour between 1809 and 1811, the bulk of which was written up in laconic, statistical fashion in 1812’s *Voyages and Travels*; a specific interlude between January and June 1810 was then fleshed out in 1813’s *Letters from the Levant*. These texts were published “without the mediation of a bookseller,” and although Galt described the *Voyages and Travels* as “in some sort an era” since it was his first major publication, the book would lapse into “curtained obscurity” (*Autobiography* 1: 233–35). Indeed his travel writing has been marginalised by criticism ever since. Mapping Galt’s 1809–11 itinerary shows him travelling eastward from Gibraltar as far as the northern limits of present-day Bulgaria, reaching the Black Sea coast to the east of Istanbul (then Constantinople), and taking in a significant portion of the Ottoman Empire, including crisscrossing journeys through mainland Greece and the Aegean archipelago (fig. 3). This was predominantly a coastal route, with Galt hopping on and off a variety of both coasting and larger oceangoing vessels, while his overland movements included almost a full perambulation of Sicily. Galt signposted this aspect of the tour by opening *Voyages and Travels* with reflections on an oceanic zone of cultural exchange: “No other space of equal extent presents so many famous cities, such opulent and populous lands, as are comprehended in the sweep of the Mediterranean, from Gibraltar to Venice. From Venice

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to Constantinople, European Turkey, by numerous gulphs of the same waters, is penetrated to the interior; and by the straits of the Bosphorus, the navigation of the largest vessels may not only be extended to Russia, but nearly to the confines of the Persian empire” (1).



Fig. 3. John Galt's Mediterranean travels, 1809–11, overlaid onto modern political borders. Purple lines indicate sections of the tour described in *Voyages and Travels* (1812), while orange lines indicate those in *Letters from the Levant* (1813).

7. Yet despite these rapturous beginnings, Galt's default in both *Voyages and Travels* and *Letters from the Levant* is the cynicism of the worldly traveller, encountering landscapes and coastlines that repeatedly fail to deliver on their promise—as in: “The superb distant prospect of Constantinople only serves to render more acute the disappointment, which arises from its interior wretchedness” (*Voyages* 255). In the same vein, he is largely unmoved by the classical antiquities beloved by a “flock of British travellers who are now pervading every part of the Ottoman dominions” (*Voyages* 337).² Much of Italy would remain under French control until 1814, and this wave of travellers diverting their “Grand Tour” further east colours Galt's rhetoric of superior indifference. For his part, with his interest firmly in the “existing condition,” Galt became discreetly engaged in investigating a trade route through the eastern Mediterranean as a way to circumvent the Napoleonic

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blockade, taking strategic advantage of the British acquisition of Malta as a protectorate in 1800, and the 1809 Treaty of the Dardanelles, which ended the Anglo-Turkish War and reopened the Ottoman Empire to British interests (*Letters* 1).³

8. This all leads into a foreign policy manifesto at the end of *Voyages and Travels*, where Galt makes a full-throated case for the superiority of British mercantile imperialism over French military coercion, culminating in a vision of “insular empire” as a counterweight to Napoleon’s Continental System: “Upon the same principle that we have been expelled from the continent, let us drive from the islands, and chase from the seas, all who retain any connection with the continent. . . . The enemy and his hostile vassals, have, hitherto, seen our naval power employed only as a defensive instrument: they have yet to feel the weight of this great trident” (*Voyages* 400). Unsurprisingly, Galt was at one point suspected of being a spy by the Ottoman authorities, who accused him of working for their Russian adversaries; while the civil commissioner of Malta, Sir Hildebrand Oakes, also supposed he was travelling with a “political mission” (*Voyages* 351; *Autobiography* 1: 177). Still, Galt himself reflected that “every traveller who gives his observations to the public is a kind of spy,” and his own distinctive brand of analytical tourism really is a form of informal espionage (*Voyages* 51).

9. On March 26, 1810, Galt embarked at Athens’s major port, the Piraeus, “in a vessel hired by Lord Elgin’s agent to carry to Malta part of those sculptures over which he has somehow acquired the claims of a proprietor” (*Letters* 232). He is referring here, of course, to the Parthenon marbles, which were then in the process of being removed to Britain. “The rape

of the temples by Lord Elgin was at that time the theme of every English tongue that came to Athens,” Galt would recall in his *Autobiography*: as an example, he insinuates that his acquaintance on the tour, Lord Byron, plagiarised his own mock-epic poem on the subject (“The Atheniad”) with “The Curse of Minerva” (*Autobiography* 1: 154).⁴ Galt often criticises antiquity treasure hunting in his travels, and in *Letters from the Levant* describes being “greatly vexed and disappointed by the dilapidation of the temple of Minerva,” albeit he was “consoled by the reflection, that the spoils are destined to ornament our own land” (112). The plot thickens in the *Autobiography*, however, where he explains that Giovanni Battista Lusieri, an Italian landscape artist then employed by Elgin, approached him at a loss of how to pay the freight costs at Malta for a forthcoming consignment, since the bills provided by Elgin “were not honoured.” “The dilemma was trying and I frankly confess my commercial cupidity obtained the ascendancy,” Galt writes. He boarded the ship, with the express intention of reappropriating the Parthenon marbles himself, in a kind of second-order looting, only to be disappointed when the earl’s agent at Malta paid the freight after all. Reflecting on the incident, Galt acknowledged the absurdity of having condemned a ransacking “in which I was myself so guilty of being accessory” (1: 158–60; see also St Clair 156–59).

10. Galt’s experiences around the Mediterranean in 1809–11 provided him with a literary treasure chest that he would revisit across the remainder of his career: Angela Esterhammer estimates that “roughly one-quarter of Galt’s published writings, fictional and nonfictional, deal directly with Continental Europe and Asia Minor” (“Agency” 324). Galt discovered a series of favourite themes, so that *Andrew of Padua* (1820), for example, “counts as a

transitional text that transposes the improvising protagonist from the Mediterranean settings of Galt's pre-1820 writings to the Scottish settings of his mature fiction" (331).⁵ Similarly, he would revisit the Byron connection on numerous occasions, including in his 1830 *Life of Lord Byron*. Perhaps most conspicuously, these early travels work through a valuation of local, regional, and national cultures that forecasts elements of what would come later in Galt's fiction, which often similarly zooms in and out between statistical-cultural minutiae and geopolitics.⁶ In the travels, this includes a commonplace series of comparisons back to Scotland, England, and Britain ("reminded me of the neighbourhood of Luss," "probably not unlike what existed in Scotland about a hundred and fifty years ago," "I enjoyed a sleep that would have done credit to a London hotel" [*Voyages* 238, 8, 322]) that hints at the simultaneous mobility and rootedness his fiction would explore.

11. Galt may have found his signature literary achievement with the globalising parish history of *Annals of the Parish*, which is underpinned by the rise of a "great web of commercial reciprocities" (160), but recentring his Mediterranean interests gives us additional purchase on his sense of place. I certainly do not mean to suggest that Galt's geographical imaginary was unchanging—in fact the elaborate home-longing he would cultivate to such success a decade later is notable by its absence circa 1810. In *Letters from the Levant*, Galt remarked on the "varied mountainous aspect, here and there patched with cultivated fields" of "the Morea, along the Gulph of Corinth" (68). Revisiting this moment in the *Autobiography* twenty years later, with the success of his 1820s fictions under his belt, Galt was specific about a resemblance to home: "It reminded me, though on a much larger scale, of the view

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of the Firth of Clyde from Bishopton Hill; at the time, however it was not so recollected, but when I afterwards returned, the similarity greatly struck me” (1: 145).

12. Galt’s travel writing afforded an early proving ground for him as a writer and cultural theorist. While coasting and island-hopping his way into and back out of the Ottoman realm, he was dovetailing statistical enquiries with a proto-anthropological appetite for “manners” (“Take this as a sketch of society and manners in the Island of Idra” [*Letters* 241]). Along the way, he reacted to the Mediterranean Basin in ways that include ironic detachment, Francophobia, and racism (“nor was it easy to avoid thinking of the odious race of the Orang Outang” [*Voyages* 5]). And, recalling now Galt’s struggle between antiquarian purism and “commercial cupidity,” the Parthenon marbles episode presents the coastlines he visited from 1809 to 1811 as places where ideology—from rival imperialisms to disinterested antiquarianism—comes sharply into focus because it is revealed as conditional. The result of this is a nascent form of the polyphony that would come to characterise Galt’s fiction, which at its best works to reveal the subtleties and inconsistencies shared by individuals with the systems they inhabit, including what Hewitt calls “the ironies of political territorialism” (“Introduction” 15). Here, as elsewhere in Galt’s writing, we should not underestimate the bedrock of chauvinist patriotism. Nonetheless, his early attempts to make sense of the eastern Mediterranean as part of a contested Eurasian milieu produced a networked vision of local, regional and (trans)national cultures, in which the category of place is perpetually under review—both subject to historical flux and apprehended through a political lens. This would echo through his dialectical regionalism of the Firth of Clyde.

The West

You have not said whether you intend the Ayrshire Legatees to be printed separately. I understand they are making some noise at Glasgow. If you determine on a republication perhaps it would be of some use to take the title of a general work & call it Tales of the West, the Parish Annals would belong to the series & also Mr Duffles travels. (Galt f.68)

Writing to his publisher William Blackwood in February 1821, Galt suggested packaging several of his recent and forthcoming single-volume novels under a series heading, the “Tales of the West.” Having given this proposal a “good deal” of thought, Blackwood declined it by reflecting that the serial premise of Walter Scott’s *Tales of my Landlord* had proven a marketing “disadvantage,” while Galt also ran a risk of seeming “imitation”—though such a “general title” might be of use at a later date once the volumes had exhausted their individual appeal (Blackwood f. 32). This plan thus nominally never came to fruition, but Galt essentially delivered his “Tales of the West” regardless in the extraordinary productivity of his early 1820s, from the first serialised episode of “The Ayrshire Legatees” in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in June 1820 to the appearance of *The Entail* in three volumes at the end of 1822 (dated 1823)—*Ringan Gilhaize* (1823) also has some claim to be considered in this light, and *The Last of the Lairds* (1826) is certainly a later entry. Above all, *The Ayrshire Legatees* (published in book form in 1821), *Annals of the Parish* (1821) and *The Provost* (1822) established Galt’s foothold in literary history: Ian Jack, for

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example, declared *The Provost* Galt's "masterpiece" (229) in 1963, superseding even the better-known *Annals of the Parish* as the prime example of his "unique contribution to prose fiction" (227; see also Galt, *Autobiography* 2: 219). More recently, Ian Duncan has aligned Galt with James Hogg in giving the Romantic-era prose fictional tale "its most striking formal development, the first-person fictional memoir grounded in local patterns of experience and discourse" (35).

13. In *The Steam-Boat*, serialised in *Blackwood's* across February–December 1821 and collected in book form the following year, "voyages and travels" seem to have radically contracted in scale from Galt's Mediterranean tourism with the account of Glasgow shopkeeper Thomas Duffle's decision "to try the benefit of the sea air in the steam-boat to Greenock" (1). There is a mock-heroic quality to this, but at the same Galt is underlining the purchase of local attachments that were being reframed rather than overcome by the cutting-edge technology of steam, in a novel that provides a key textual witness of the widespread commercial adoption of steamboats in the 1820s.⁷ And the focus on Greenock is not incidental but rather part of a long-term negotiation of his own roots in the town, where he spent formative years from 1789 until 1804 as well as several later junctures of his life.

14. This project also encompassed Galt's birthplace of Irvine; Andrew O'Hagan has observed that Galt "brings the place ceaselessly back as a manifest of his own native psychology" (9). Returning briefly to the *Voyages and Travels*, Galt's account of the Greek city of Larissa records "walking along the margin" of the river "Peneus" (Pineios) in an "agreeable

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submission of mind, in which the memory becomes more predominant than the fancy.” “The gentle sense of past pleasure diffuses a satisfaction that approximates nearer to the idea of happiness than that emotion which springs from the expectations and encouragements of hope,” he explains (219–20). Subsequently retooling this experience for the ostensibly more personal register of the *Autobiography*, Galt was more specific, copying out a poem “To the River Peneus” written in a mood of “strange sadness,” which closes:

Ah! never shall I know again
Those simple hopes of blithesome hue,
The playmates gay of fancy’s train,
Such as by Irvine’s stream I knew. (1: 187–88)

We cannot ever equate Galt the man with his fictional creations. But it was to his advantage that such reckoning with home in the context of a highly mobile, internationalising nineteenth century ultimately found a compelling form, and an enthusiastic audience, in the 1820s.

15. Galt would reflect at the outset of his *Autobiography* that although he personally experienced a sense of “constraint” in his early Greenock years, he maintained “the strongest local attachment” to the town (1: 23). Crucially, the tourism of *The Steam-Boat* allows him to exoticise the “manners and customs,” “religious ceremonies and antiquities” of Greenock (55), with coastlines again working as defamiliarising contact zones. At the

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same time, Galt indulges in a running joke about the “inferiority” (124) of neighbouring Port Glasgow, thus triangulating perspectives among local-cosmopolitan author, Glaswegian narrator, and readers with various acceptable levels of insider knowledge, from none upwards. Galt often recycled his vision of local rivalry along the Clyde, one centring on an intensely phallic question of church steeples. In Port Glasgow, for example, Duffle explains that a waiter “directed my attention to the steeple, telling me that it was higher than the Greenock one; but we have so many handsome steeples in Glasgow, it could not reasonably be expected that this of ‘the Port’ would be regarded by me as any very extraordinary object” (118–19). In Ian Gordon’s edition of Galt’s *The Last of the Lairds*, which returns to manuscript to undo D. M. Moir’s severe “pruning” (xiv) of the 1826 text, there is a “straemash” in Renfrew when its steeple is “misca’d.” The narrator then reflects: “the only perfect steeple that I have ever heard of—is the Greenock steeple” (see the Mid Kirk steeple, completed 1787, fig. 4), going on to explain: “I have ever entertained a particular affection for steeples. In my nonage, their principal charm to me consisted in their height—after that I began to feel interested in their shapes, and of late years—no doubt a forerunning symptom of age—I have thought of them as monuments” (96–97).⁸



Fig. 4. Anonymous, “View of the Middle Church of Greenock and Cathcart Square” (1810), McLean Museum and Art Gallery, Inverclyde Archives, CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0.

16. In Geertz’s terms, this material generates a “thick” social world, such that Galt’s work plausibly represents a landmark in the anglophone novel’s embrace of regional specificity, which was headlined by the Waverley Novels although it looks back through Maria Edgeworth to eighteenth-century precedents, including Tobias Smollett. Emerging from this tradition, Galt’s regionalism fundamentally depends on mobility: it is a social text brought into being by the negotiation of its horizons. In *The Steam-Boat*, Duffie’s frame narrative is a journey that finds its meaning in the distances from home, and is interwoven with a series of short tales taking in what Josephine McDonagh calls a “vast panoply of places” (86). The story of a grieving mother’s journey to the battlefield of Waterloo in search of “the spot” where her son died, for example, not only begins and ends in Ayrshire, but segues immediately into the parochial disputes of Greenock and its opponents, in a juxtaposition of perspectives bringing each other into relief in the maritime nineteenth century (Galt, *Steam-Boat* 38–49). This oscillation is essential to Galt’s method: not only

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does he work through the dialectical terms of autoethnography by gatekeeping “thick” locality for a range of potential audiences, but he presents that locality itself as an increasingly centripetal point in a busy network of travel for business, pleasure, war, adventure or out of emotional necessity. This is true even of the more obviously local works, such as *Annals of the Parish* and *The Provost*, which observe the tidal incursions of world history in provincial life. For his part, Duffle reflects of the soldier’s mother, “Judge of my surprise, when I found out that my present companion had, like her predecessor, visited many far off parts of the Continent.” This mobility really comes as no surprise at all for readers familiar with Galt, for whom the “decent” and “blithesome” west-coast character is perpetually flowing into and reforming out of its “venturesome” horizons (*Steam-Boat* 35–36).

17. The standard place one visits to make sense of the west of Scotland in this context is not Waterloo, however, but London. Echoing the Pringle family’s journey in *The Ayrshire Legatees*, another of the inset tales in *The Steam-Boat* talks back to “the shire of Renfrew” (141) from the metropolis; Galt recasts Jeanie Deans’s metropolitan adventure from Walter Scott’s *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* (1818) to “the West” by giving her origins in the fictional “Mineybole” (159); and Duffle himself eventually makes it south on board the titular vessel: “London being, as is well known, a place of more considerable repute than Greenock, or even Port Glasgow, notwithstanding the renown of its steeple” (170). Joseph Rezek has argued that Irish, Scottish, and American authors were working to produce the modern form of the aesthetic in the early nineteenth century by framing their localities for the London press, developing a “paradox” that has subsequently become a “cliché”: “that

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a great work of literature is both particular and universal” (14–15). The core-periphery relationships this signified were, of course, rarely if ever unidirectional, and in Galt’s case, regional specificity is achieved by crisscrossing journeys both north and south, with London an alien looking glass for Galt’s protagonists, though perhaps not for his metropolitan readers, both of whom come under the scrutiny of his variety of culture-by-encounter. The city is populated in the darker reaches of Galt’s imagination by moneygrubbing zombies (“the Effigies”), “adventurers” who have gravitated to London, where “their element consists of the necessities of a commercial community,” having “neither passions, appetites, nor affections;—without reason, imagination, or heart” (Galt, *Steam-Boat* 271–73). At the same time, London proves to be absolutely crawling with familiar faces, some of whom are transplants from Galt’s other works (notably in *The Steam-Boat*, the Pringles themselves), generating a sustained fictional world ordered by the quest narrative of the migrant Clydesider.

18. The most elaborate development of this London topos comes in 1822’s triple-decker *Sir Andrew Wylie*. There, Galt signals his debt to Smollett’s 1748 fictional autobiography *Roderick Random*, in which the protagonist also returns home to the west of Scotland in a “flourishing condition” (Smollett 433).⁹ Still, at the end of Smollett’s novel, Random is frankly suspicious at being offered the freedom of Glasgow, whereas seventy years later, Andrew Wylie’s career in business is consistently in service of his nostalgic home-longing. “I have ever looked to taking my rest among the scenes of my young days,” Wylie declares, “for still, in my thought, the mornings there are brighter than those I have seen in any other place” (Galt, *Sir Andrew Wylie* 3: 112). In one symbolically weighty passage, the now rich

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and famous Wylie returns to Ayrshire and looks out onto the Firth of Clyde: “The whole coast, from the towers of Culzeen to the promontory of Ardrossan, glittered with towns and villages, and the seats of many, who, like our hero, had returned home to enjoy the fruits of their prosperous adventures” (3: 123–24). The coastline is a place one leaves and returns to, feeding the homeland with your winnings, via an attachment capable of enduring not only because of its grip on the imagination, but also because this patriotic regionalism is a normative element of the imperial-commercial habitus.

19. *Andrew Wylie*’s third-person narration is a departure for Galt from what Trumpener calls his use of fictional autobiography “to focus attention on the internal development and historical force of an ideological position” (*Bardic Nationalism* 278–79). However, it remains a study of the texture of belonging across time and place. There is an obviously autobiographical element to this in light of Galt’s own London experiences—the *Steam-Boat*, too, contains what reads like (a much darker) fictionalised account of the London Galt (277–83), told in that case by a man with the migrant stigmata of “a salt-water complexion” (270). Yet neither the socialisation of nostalgic home-longing as an aspect of the imperial milieu, nor echoes of the author’s personal experience, make this material any less *literary*. Duncan and Esterhammer both identify Wylie’s status as an “original”—his distinctive regional and national character—as the basis of his social credit and entrepreneurial success, while also calling attention to the degree to which this is a performed commodity (Galt, *Sir Andrew Wylie* 1: 93; Duncan 92–93; Esterhammer, *Print* 146–54). One of the outcomes of Galt’s capacity to situate individuals in social contexts, certainly, is a sense of belonging as a codified performance. Local attachment

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may be both a commercial and an emotional necessity for Wylie, but Galt's reader can hardly miss its function as a popular literary device across these fictions, where it is a binding narrative arc. Geographically speaking, however, it is not at all clear that Wylie's home-longing is "Scottish" in any leading sense. Instead, the networks of economic migration are accompanied by specific local attachments, such that "Scotland" where it appears presents a synecdoche for this portion of the western seaboard, rather than the other way around.

20. Galt's later transatlantic fictions are variations on this model. In 1830's *Lawrie Todd*, it is not London but the United States that is the existential outland that must be traversed by the hero, and which similarly turns out to be populated by friends of friends. This seeming coincidence is commonplace in Scottish fiction in the early decades of the nineteenth century, with the romance architecture of the novel echoing the real penetration of imperial and international networks by itinerant Scots mobilising regional patronage structures. For *Lawrie Todd*, however, the expatriate community is never a complete substitute: he reflects that the "desire" of home-longing "had never ceased to languish in my bosom" (2: 291). The chasm of the Atlantic, it is true, puts a far greater strain on belonging's socio-imaginative integrity: at one point Todd finds that his "native land . . . seemed to offer me no resting place" since he "had acquired notions and ways, both of thinking and of acting, not in harmony with those of the new generation" (3: 117). Still, in what amounts to a thought experiment about conflicting loyalties, with the migrant torn between his original, filial patriotism and the commercial opportunities of the fledgling United States, home wins at last. Todd represents this as a kind of rational irrationalism, asking "does not much more

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of our happiness depend upon fancies and feelings, than upon the decisions of our judgment? Sometimes I think, if we gave better heed to them than to the elections of the understanding, our days would pass in a more even and easy tenour” (3: 118–19). He does ultimately make a return journey across the Atlantic in a notable departure from Galt’s source material.¹⁰

21. On one level, the “fancies” of nostalgic home-longing speak to an emotional superstructure that is no more a match for the hard realities of global commerce than it was when the sentimental poet John Galt boarded ship at the Piraeus to commandeer the Parthenon Marbles. Todd, it is worth noting, only decisively embraces the force of his local attachment once secure of his American wealth. But at the same time, Galt’s works navigate a world in which a private myth of origins must be continuously reckoned with, and in which imperial adventurism and settler-colonial expansion are accompanied by a compulsive backward gaze. And again in *Lawrie Todd*, Galt cannot keep away from the Firth of Clyde as the emotional centrepiece of his nostalgic world-system: Lawrie Todd, who is from the east coast, has his patriotism tested when, “On entering the Firth of Clyde, scenting the pleasant smell of the peat reek from the Island of Arran, and seeing the Craig of Ailsa rising blue before us, the thought of my father’s home, and the sunny days of my green years, invested my spirit as with a mantle of remembrances” (3: 6). Galt is not, or not often, a cloying nostalgist, but he is a tenacious one. His migrant regionalism continuously negotiates between powerful local attachments and a peripatetic world order: sometimes these operate in conflict, but even such negative cases make it abundantly clear

that, in Galt's mature fiction, imperial mobility is always substantially a narrative of homecoming.

Of Greenock

22. Across the 1820s and into the 1830s, Galt popularised an imaginative geography of the Firth of Clyde that was not coterminous with, and should not be automatically dissolved into, Scottishness. For one thing, his fiction is comedically but also inveterately suspicious of the capital city, Edinburgh, home to a highfalutin legal culture that finds its double in bloated and unproductive literary criticism, a conjunction embodied in the figure of Francis Jeffrey, advocate and reviewer (Galt, *Steam-Boat* 337–41). Equally, Galt's representation of the Firth of Clyde is not particularly interested in the Highland line, in a departure from the work of Walter Scott, whose treatment of this region in back-to-back 1818 novels, *Rob Roy* and *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*, explored a divided Highland/Lowland national mythology. When Galt pays any attention to the “ancient mountains looking austere upon us from the other side” of the firth, they are a superficial curtain of “mysteries” undercut by a vein of Celtophobia (Galt, “Tribulations” 101, 111, 99). For O'Hagan, Galt's nostalgic method is rooted above all in his command of the dialects of Scots spoken inside the firth's parabolic coast: “He only had to apply a word from his youth” to conjure this “world whole again” (10–11). How peculiar, then, that the Gaelic voices that would have been commonplace in Greenock are mute. For McDonagh, Galt's “preoccupation with sound and hearing” manifests in the “sublimated violence” of a North American literary colonialism in which Indigenous peoples are “silenced” (73, 82, 108); we have already

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noted the intermittent xenophobia of his early travel writing. Yet his production of the west of Scotland also involves selective procedures laced with powerful social inequalities.

23. Instead of the cultural fault-line embodied by Scott in the kinship of Glasgow merchant Bailie Nicol Jarvie and Highland outlaw Rob Roy Macgregor, Galt presents an alternative frontier culture along the shoreline in which Greenock, especially, is a chaotic scene of opportunity and movement, inhabited by “folk accustomed to make their living by the sea,” with “so many strangers coming by the shipping” and a sense of “dishevelment” that is distinct even from “landward” and “creditable” Glasgow (Galt, “Rich Man” 152–53). In Robert Salmon’s 1812 “View of the Middle Church and Harbour, Greenock” (fig. 5), this coastal georgic is vividly materialised, the eye being drawn out past the figures in the left foreground, across a prosperous townscape crested with chimney smoke and the erect Mid Kirk steeple, to a moving forest of masts in the harbour stretching out into the Firth of Clyde. Further north, the beginnings of a Highland landscape are both literally and metaphorically background, for a habitus constituted by ships coming and going with the tides, laden with colonial commodities including sugar, in a town existing fundamentally at the water’s edge, with each building a kind of accessory to the port.



Fig. 5. Robert Salmon, “View of the Middle Church and Harbour, Greenock” (1812), McLean Museum and Art Gallery, Inverclyde Archives, CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0.

24. In his *Autobiography*, Galt writes that his own “tastes” and “habits” eventually became too “simple” for Greenock (1: 276), although in an echo of his protagonist archetype, he would complete the cycle of life by returning to the town a last time in 1834. He died at West Burn Street in Greenock on April 11, 1839. Greenock in his writing is typically a self-important commercial powerhouse, with institutions such as the Greenock Library (est. 1783 and essential to Galt’s education) emblematising the civic aspirations of many Scottish provincial towns in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Harris and McKean 92–93). This maritime community, however, was almost uniquely plugged into the colonial traffic of the period, which enabled it to mushroom from a “row of thatched houses” ca. 1700 to a “large, populous, tolerably well built town” in the 1810s, with a population judged at 19,042 (Gemmill 23). Stephen Mullen writes that “by the 1760s

Greenock was the premier slave-trading port in Scotland” (43), with a filiation of commercial links to slavery going well beyond documented slaving voyages. In a series of “Letters on West Indian Slavery” to *Fraser’s Magazine* across 1830–31, Galt himself condemned the institution of slavery while strongly advocating compensation for slave owners following emancipation. Certainly there is a cruel irony in the juxtaposition of this aspect of Greenock’s history with the discourse of belonging in Galt’s work.

25. Like Scott, Galt sometimes presents Scottish regional difference in an elegiac register, in which it is under threat from the homogenising forces of modernisation (“improvement”). But Greenock is an interesting case as a gravitational well to his transatlantic homeworld, since its distinctive culture was already such a chaotic cycle of maritime commerce, existentially bound to the tidal energies of the Atlantic. John Wood’s 1825 “Plan of the Town of Greenock” (fig. 6) highlights the thorough orientation of the settlement around its harbour and the merchant nerve centre of the Custom House, with a street layout pressing close to and echoing the topography of the Firth seaboard like a series of inland ripples (note also the “Gaelic Chapel” at C, on the corner of West Stewart Street and West Burn Street). Tobago Street and Sugar House Lane speak for themselves as explanations for this coastal gridwork, while the beautiful selectivity of Wood’s map gives the town an effect of island isolation, fronting the sandbank in the top right and similarly adrift in a sea of yellowed paper.

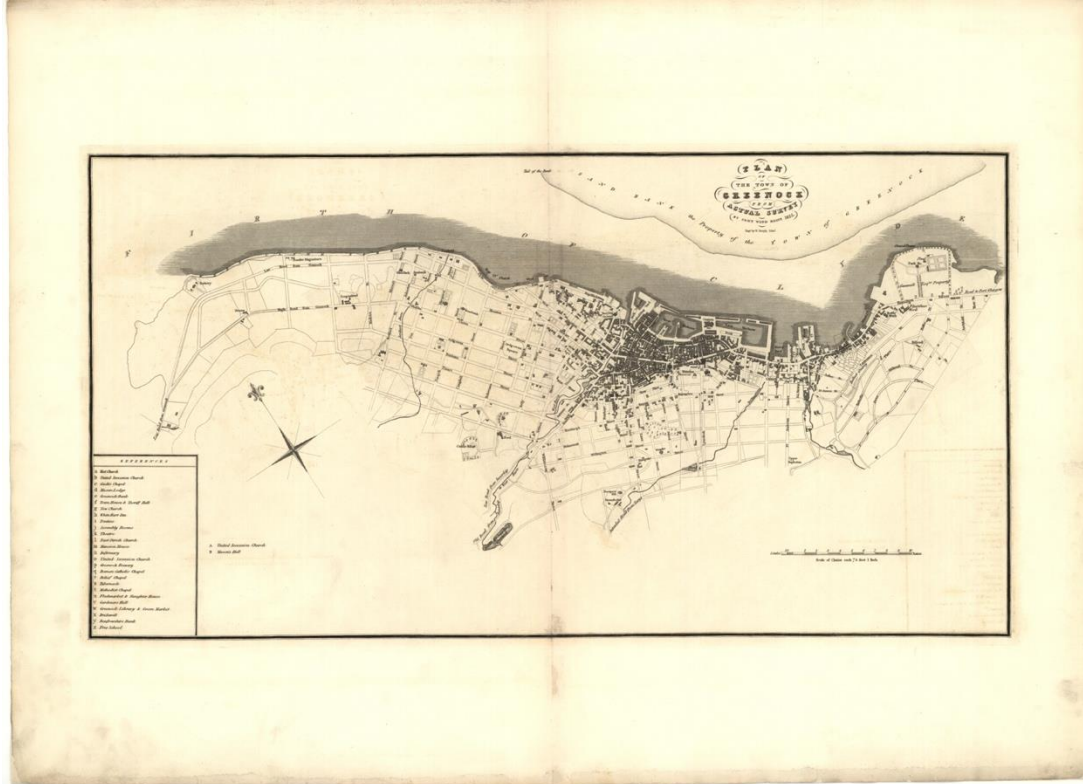


Fig. 6. John Wood, “Plan of the Town of Greenock from Actual Survey,” engraved by W. Murphy (Edinburgh: J. Wood, 1825). Reproduced with permission of the National Library of Scotland.

26. A coastal regionalism concerned with reimagining this place, then, is at the heart of Galt’s distinctively 1820s development of what I have called the Scottish “home” topos. This was not naïve local boosterism from Galt, a well-travelled sophisticate given to the conventional imperial description of “Britain” as “England” (see *Voyages* 52, 64; and *Autobiography* 1: 96, 175), whose *Autobiography* foregrounds his international business career (“a series of transactions”) while derogating literary work as “a poor trade” (1: vii, 84).¹¹ Rather, it was an innovative contribution to a mass-media trend. By the time Galt’s biggest hit, *Annals of the Parish*, appeared in May 1821, Scott had already published eleven instalments of the Waverley Novels, while a swelling diaspora addicted to *Blackwood’s Magazine* was bringing to fever pitch a discourse of home-longing traceable back through

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the Jacobite exile verse and Scottish pastoral of the eighteenth century.¹² Indeed in 1820, just as Galt was about to really arrive as a writer, Scott had returned from the Yorkshire and Midlands setting of *Ivanhoe* to the Scottish Borders, locating *The Monastery* (he would reflect a decade later) at “the celebrated ruins of Melrose, in the immediate neighbourhood of his own residence,” in a temporary “change of system” (Scott 42).

27. For his part, Galt’s forceful embrace in his fiction of regional subject matter conceived as a node in the world-system, unquestionably with commercial success in mind, underlines the 1820s as a cultural moment suffused by ethnographic and autoethnographic versions of regional difference troped as rich “eccentricity” (McDonagh 82). We tend to think about regionalism as a subordinate, more or less complicated building block of nationalism. Yet in the new versions of the Enlightenment theory of circles of influence being offered by Galt and his peers, nationalism often remains the subordinate category, a precarious extension of regionalism’s social networks and its hold on the affections. At the same time, the anchoring home-feeling that Galt explores in particular through Greenock is dynamically transatlantic, at once a merchant, a traveller and an improver’s sense of place. Instead of Ossianic precarity, the hometown of James Watt, whose improvements to steam-engine design (most notably the separate condenser) had made the Firth of Clyde into an epicentre of the global industrial revolution, provides Galt with the nucleus for an itinerant regionalism in which identities must be obsessively and continuously remade at the horizon of modernity.¹³

28. “Improvement” is the final piece of the puzzle here. As should be clear from the above, Galt was a confirmed speculator who put his hand to a wide range of projects across his life, from the continental scope of his Mediterranean schemes and Canadian colonialism to more local interests. In fact, the young Galt developed a (thwarted) proposal to reclaim the sandbank visible in the Wood map of Greenock, indicative of the entrepreneurialism that accompanied what I have called his coastal imaginary. “In contriving schemes such as these my youth was spent” (Galt, *Autobiography* 1: 21), Galt explained, and indeed this sensibility is one of the defining characteristics of his literary output both fictional and nonfictional: commercial “improvement is not at variance with, but is the food of stability” (*Autobiography* 1: 238) he writes, providing a “spectacle, at all times gratifying” (2: 47). Still, there is dissension from this attitude in the celebrated fiction, whether Micah Balwhidder’s instinctive traditionalism in *Annals of the Parish* or the chaotic social disintegration of *The Entail* (McKeever, *Dialectics* 149–84). Equally, in the North American novels, some critics have found Galt making space to problematise his long-term, enthusiastic pursuit of an improving vision for Upper Canada and for British commercial imperialism writ large (Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism* 274–88; Hewitt, “Introduction” 14; McNeil 314–26).¹⁴

29. Such parsing is valuable from a literary perspective, though certainly neither Galt’s polyphony, nor instances in which he advocated for Indigenous rights (e.g., *Autobiography* 1: 283–90), should be called upon to mitigate the destructive historical effects of colonialism. The closing point I wish to make here, however, is simply that not all places nor all cultures are of equivalent value in the nostalgic edifice constituted serially by Galt.

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Apparent inconsistencies between the coloniser and the nostalgist might be explained away by viewing his fictions of belonging *purely* as fashionable products of the 1820s. And yet what might strike us as cognitive dissonance was an essential feature of long eighteenth-century Scotland, where sophisticated home-longing marked an unfolding domestic history of clearances as well as economic emigration, but was also an imperial reflex, dogged by acts of erasure at the colonial frontier. Hence McDonagh's insight that Galt's thick sense of identity as mediated in his "narrative voice" provides "a medium through which to conjure spaces, create and police communities, and dominate nature and other people" (74). If a systematic view of the local *depends* on the abstraction enabled by intercultural encounter—if ethnography depends on ethnology—it remains an unfortunate reality that localised difference, and the value it implies, frequently loses resolution for us when the subject is unfamiliar.¹⁵ Galt's own dialectical regionalism is transnational in its reach, yes, and evolving by its nature, but this does not equate to an open pluralism.

30. All of which brings me back to the Canadian forest that had just become Guelph on April 23, 1827, St. George's Day, a date chosen by Galt in his pursuit of what Trumpener calls "origin myths" ("Annals" 45). In an earlier account of the founding ceremony described in the *Autobiography*, Galt noted that "Tiger" Dunlop was dressed for the proceedings "in two blankets, one in the Celtic and the other in the Roman fashion," so that the mythic opposition of improvement and savagery in this version recalls Agricola and the Roman conquest of Britain ("Guelph" 456; and see McDonagh 103–04). In this respect, and recalling now Guelph's peculiar access via waterways to the ocean, the transatlantic economy surrounding Galt's (by his own estimation) crowning achievement finds its

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accompaniment in a similarly oriented cultural politics. And here, too, are lines back to the Firth of Clyde: Dunlop, predictably enough, hailed from Greenock. Despite costing little “more than the publication of a novel,” the founding history of Guelph forcefully materialises Galt’s thinking about home and belonging, just as the map of Upper Canada, with imported place names like Trafalgar and Waterloo, but also Dumfries and Lanark, Galt and Guelph, not to mention a Canadian copy of the Greenock Mid Kirk steeple in New Brunswick on the eastern seaboard, extends Scottish home-longing well beyond the confines of fashionable literary culture and the coastline of the Firth of Clyde.

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Notes

¹ On the construction of “two Galts” by relatively distinct critical traditions on either side of the Atlantic, see McDonagh (72). Hewitt (“Introduction” 14) makes a similar point, as does McNeil (270–71).

² Buzard associates a variety of “anti-tourism” that was “aimed at distinguishing authentic from spurious or merely repetitive experience” with broadening access to the continental tour following the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 (6).

³ Galt writes in the *Autobiography* (1: 147) that the idea of this “scheme” first came to him in the Greek city of Tripoli in February 1810. See also vol. 1, pp. 170–77 and pp. 228–30. He outlines another potential trading route between Malta and the East Indies via Egypt at the end of *Letters* (379–86).

⁴ On distinct similarities between the poems, and Galt’s other claims of having influenced Byron including in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, see Morrison (8–10).

⁵ Esterhammer has recently edited *Andrew of Padua* for Galt, *Three Short Novels*.

⁶ Demata particularly emphasises Galt’s sense of echoes between Scotland and Albania through the logic of stadial history. See also Hammond (152); and Morrison (16). Çaykent also finds Galt honing stadially founded comparisons on the continent.

⁷ For the Clyde context, see Williamson.

⁸ I am grateful to Regina Hewitt, Gerard Carruthers, and Viki McDonnell for helping to confirm the Greenock steeple discussed repeatedly by Galt.

⁹ See Galt’s reference to *Roderick Random* in *Sir Andrew Wylie* (3: 245).

¹⁰ On Galt's diversion from the real-life biography of Grant Thorburn in this instance, see McNeil (314–15).

¹¹ Galt expanded on his literary career in *The Literary Life, and Miscellanies, of John Galt*.

¹² Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart particularly identifies this aspect of Scottish literature with the Gaelic tradition, through a long evolution of “feelings of dispossession: resentment, nostalgia, internal exile, and hopes of restoration” (36).

¹³ See Mullen on Watt's extensive personal and family links to the slave trade.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Cass takes the alternative view of a Galt lacking “nuanced moral and ethical compunctions about colonialist intervention,” whose fictions are cynical “screens for his capitalistic intentions.” See “John Galt and the Colonization of Canada” (136–37). This is the second in a trio of related essays: see also Cass, “John Galt, Happy Colonialist”; and Cass, “John Galt: Capitalism and Ecology.” For a less polemical view, see Irvine.

¹⁵ Compare, here, Esterhammer (“Agency”) on Galt's more generalised investment in a system of national characters at a continental European scale.