

Alasdair &

*Other Stuff*

Gray and Ireland



# Gray and Ireland

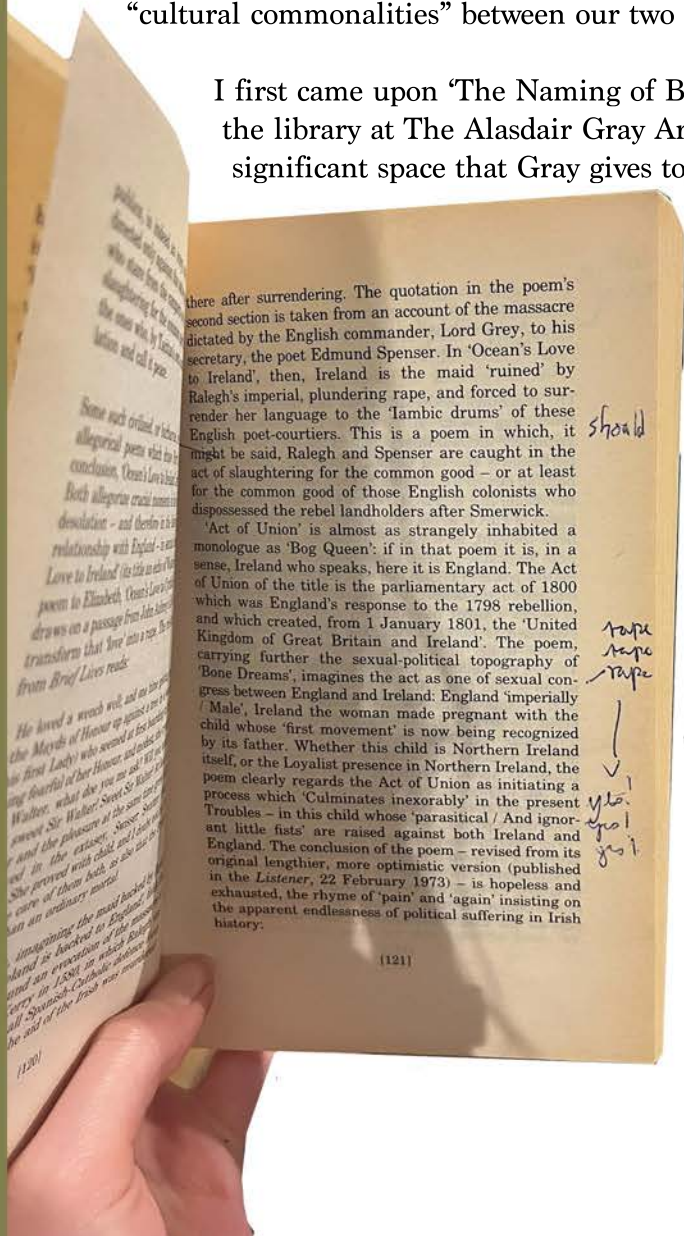
Written by Rosa Armstrong, 2025

Alasdair Gray's Glaswegian identity is essential to all that he made: his art, his novels and his poetry; they are inextricably linked. As a woman from Belfast, one of the first things that struck me when I first entered into the creative world of Gray, through *Lanark* (1981), was the similarity in language and cultural background of Glasgow to my own home city of Belfast and my Northern Irish identity. Glasgow and Belfast have always been closely linked, as the chief cultural and industrial centres of our closely neighbouring countries. They share a joint Celtic heritage with related and comparable native languages and dialects, as well as a shared history and literary tradition in mythology and storytelling. Richard Alan Barlow (2022) refers to this as "Literary Celticism" and observes a parallel Irish and Scottish literary revival in the 20th century, that he terms "late Celticism," when writers in both the Irish and Scottish contexts simultaneously explored and encouraged the connection between Ireland and Scotland: James Joyce considered Scotland and Ireland to be "sister nations"; Hugh MacDiarmid very explicitly used Ireland's political progress as a "source of inspiration for Scotland"; and Seamus Heaney has often talked about the "cultural commonalities" between our two countries.

I first came upon 'The Naming of Britain' in a copy of *Gray's Collected Verse* (2010) in the library at The Alasdair Gray Archive. I was immediately struck by the significant space that Gray gives to the Northern Irish experience in his poetic survey of Great British history, highlighting a notable relationship between the two nations. In further exploring the collection at AGA, I found Gray's collection of W.B. Yeats' poems which had been clearly very well-read, and even contained a striking portrait drawn by Gray on the back cover. I then found Gray's copy of *A Students Guide to Seamus Heaney* (1986), which was heavily annotated with conflicting ideas on the original text: at one point, the editor refers to the "sexual congress between England and Ireland" alongside which Gray has effusively written, "rape, rape, rape!" Having discovered just these various interactions Gray had with Irish Literature, I started thinking about the various ways in which Scottish and Irish poets, writers and artists have influenced one another.

AGA.1.5.353

Alasdair Gray's annotated copy of *A Students Guide to Seamus Heaney* (1986).  
Photograph: Rosa Armstrong, 2025



These thoughts only grew in volume after studying Gray's books on Scottish history, which were full of forthright annotations in defence of Scotland and its identity in terms which were only too familiar to me. For these reasons I conducted a brief examination of some of the key themes and dynamics, to do with the problem of national identity, which operate in Gray's poem, 'The Naming of Britain,' alongside several other important poems from Scotland and Northern Ireland, in order to bring to light some of the similar and different ways in which they address this same problem. In doing so, I drew on the main similarities that Ray Ryan usefully highlights between Scotland and Ireland. Firstly, Scotland and Ireland share a long and symbiotic linguistic tradition, with Irish and Scottish Gaelic; which were both outlawed and declined before their latter-day reclamations. Secondly, they share distinct geographical similarities in landscape, from the rural to the urbanised areas, as well as climate and nature. Thirdly, we have a shared history within the British state, consisting of varying experiences of exploitation by the English, and its legacy of continued sectarian violence and conflict. And lastly, the common experience of a contested identity, which exists in different but comparable forms in both. Through my time on placement at AGA, I have explored how these four similarities manifest in modern Celtic poetry that draws these two nations closer together. For this I created a term of reference - the four pillars of modern poetical Celticism. By focusing on modern Celtic poetry, I shall explore the relationship between Gray and Northern Ireland by situating him within the wider Celtic literary tradition and in so doing highlighting an important dimension which underpins Gray's literature as a whole.

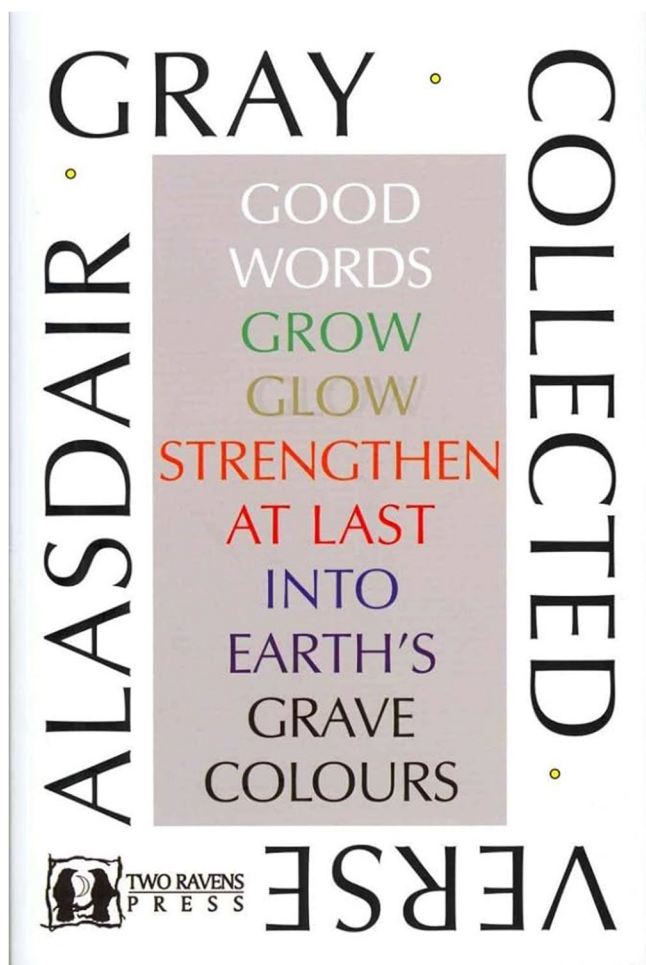
I started by examining Gray's 'The Naming of Britain' (2010) specifically in terms of what it says about Scottish and Irish history, looking then at Tom Leonard's famous *Six Glasgow Poems* (1969), which were written in Glaswegian dialect, in connection with the ongoing battle for representation and reclamation of the various native Celtic tongues. Moving across the water, I explored Louis MacNeice's 'Carrickfergus' (1937) as a poem about (personal and public) place, which is inscribed with religious, industrial and colonial signifiers. And finally, I examined Heaney's 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing' (1975), elaborating on the ways in which it expresses the conflicts and anxieties of Heaney's specific Irish identity, and by extension, a broader Celtic identity. Each poem represents one of four categories of similarity between Scotland and Ireland, but as will become apparent, the various themes within them continually overlap, intermingle and underpin each other in interesting and significant ways.

AGA 5.08 Library. Photograph: Abby Carter, 2025.



## Gray

As Eilidh Macleod Whiteford (1997) puts it in her study into the power of Gray's literature, "national history, literary history and personal history" are among Gray's main preoccupations. 'The Naming of Britain' (2010) epitomizes this interest whilst simultaneously parodying and reimagining the conventional historical notion of a glorious, united and unproblematic Britain and Britishness. Starting in 330 B.C, a significantly huge time frame is established for the poem, setting the scene of British disputes within the wider context of its place in human history as a whole; where civilisations, empires and colonies rise and fall, come and go. This new perspective is bluntly affirmed by the first significant statement in the poem: "Britain was never the name of a single nation." Ireland is first mentioned in the stanza immediately after this line, naming it as the "first colony"; and obviously implying that there were many more to follow. From this point on, Gray's innovative subversion of the epic form becomes more apparent. (Northern Irish poets have similarly repurposed poetic forms; most notably perhaps, Paul Muldoon and his experiments with the sonnet.) His sarcastic and disrespectful, almost casual, account of King James moving to London and becoming "Britain's chief landlord", stresses the fundamentally exploitative financial relationship within the new nation (and its colonies). The heroic figures and glorious deeds which usually constitute the subject matter of epic poetry, and the standard British historical narrative of itself, are here destabilized and subverted to reveal the less-flattering truth about the establishment of this "one kingdom despite [its] contradictory facts": the facts of obviously independent identities and clearly passionate resistance. Gray then gives over a weighty section of the poem to the various deep religious conflicts that created "centuries of political pain", with reference to the English clearance of Ulster for Scottish Protestants and the rebellious "Catholic Ireland" who were "bloodily quelled" by England. This is then followed by another significant section which demonstrates the (highly contentious) Scottish/Irish collaboration with the British Empire, as well as the eventual breakdown of Empire; with Ireland, barring Ulster, following the USA in breaking away from Britain. However, while he bluntly states that "national empires end," the "commercial empire remains". Ramming home the exploitative economic realities of all imperialism, he goes on to very damningly refer to the US President as "America's chief-war businessman." Gray's revision of the British historical legacy climaxes in the sardonic penultimate line: "Ulster Protestants may be the last to gladly claim the British name". As such, the poem ends where it began, indicating the constant/fundamental delusion that these islands are a "single nation."



AGA.1.5.351. Gray, A. (2010)  
*Collected Verse*, Two Ravens Press,

Very much in the spirit of Benedict Anderson's famous *Imagined Communities*, (1983) Gray is arguing that the whole notion of Britain and Britishness is a construct. The pillar in the modern tradition of Celticism that Gray utilises most heavily here is obviously the shared history under the British state, however he also importantly touches on place through the migratory movements of Scots to Ulster, and he also significantly explores the contested identity of those within the Celtic nations whose Celtic identity was long forbidden. By representing the Celtic narrative of Ireland and Scotland within the British Empire, Gray articulates the strange relationship between these two Celtic nations as he unfolds their individual, joint and overlapping histories.

## MacNeice

Gavin Lundy in his essay on Gray's Glasgow highlights that Glasgow exists as a "major character" within most of Gray's work. One of my favourite portraits of Glasgow is perhaps Gray's most well-known oil painting, *Cowcaddens Streetscape In The Fifties* (1964), which visualises a Glasgow that reminded me of the Belfast and Carrickfergus that the Irish writer Louis MacNeice describes in his poem 'Carrickfergus' (1937). MacNeice paints a poetic portrait of the Ulster that he remembers from his childhood, but one that is also replete with deeper national and historical resonances; in particular, the town's significance as an early bridgehead of the British Empire. MacNeice was born "to the Anglican order" (a pointed, probable, pun; and reference to his father being an Church of Ireland minister) "between the mountains and the gantries" in Belfast, referring to Black Mountain (the land) and the Harland and Wolff shipyard (heavy industry), which is well-known as the building place of the RMS Titanic. But at that stage, the shipbuilding industry in Belfast was then, like its Glasgow counterparts on the Clyde, in serious decline. He then moved to Carrickfergus, home to the main commercial port of Ulster at the time, just up the northern shore of Belfast Lough.



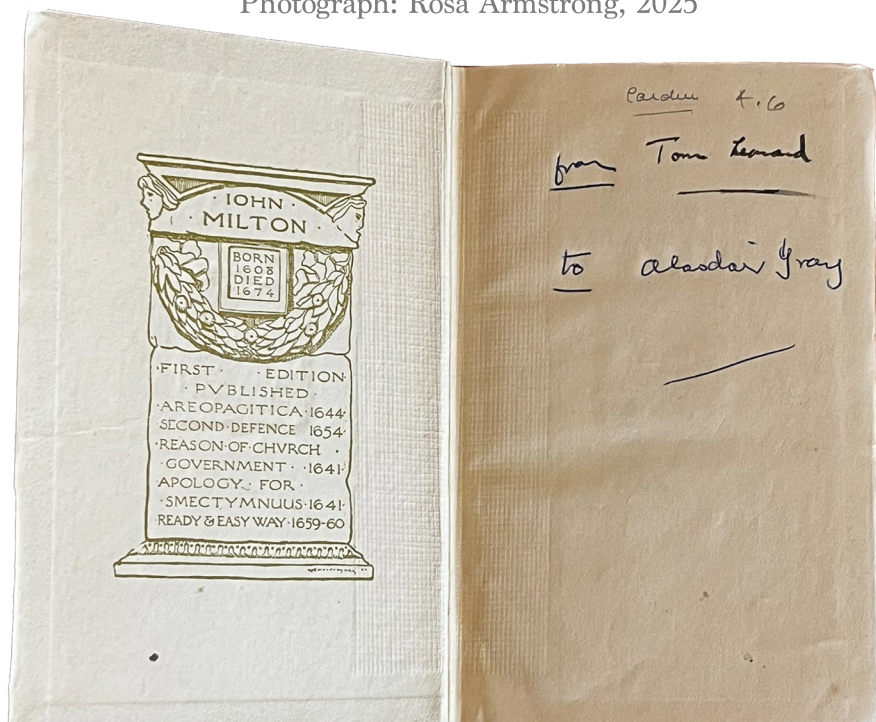
Gray, A. (1964), *Cowcaddens Streetscape in the Fifties*, oil on hard board, 121.5x224 cm  
From *A Life in Pictures*, Alasdair Gray, 2010, Canongate

The proud industrial history of Northern Ireland, with its ships and its linen, is replaced with an altogether less positive present. MacNeice describes Carrickfergus as “smoky” with a “brook [that] ran yellow from the factory stinking of chlorine.” The “yarn-milled call[ing] its funeral cry at noon” fills the Carrickfergus soundscape and Belfast likewise is depicted as being polluted with the “hooting of lost sirens and the clang of trams.” This all evokes the same darkness and somberness that is seen in Gray’s Glasgow: the factories in the backdrop of his painting puffing clouds of smoke into the already-gloomy and overcast sky. Like Gray, MacNeice also importantly performs a broad sweep through the history of Carrickfergus: from Norman times, through the Plantation, and the wartime “Carrick” crowded by “the soldiers with their guns,” during World War One. Most notably, MacNeice references the Scottish Presbyterian migration to Ulster, which has in modern times manifested in a disparity between the advantaged “residential [...] Scotch quarter” and the disadvantaged “slum” of the Irish quarter.” Much like Gray’s awareness of the Scottish-Irish disparity in Glasgow, this reminds us that the parallels between the Scottish and the Irish in Britain are not absolute: indeed, the Northern Irish critic, Edna Longley, in her influential book *Louis MacNeice (1988), A Study*, argues that ‘Carrickfergus,’ “epitomises disunity” (1988). Nevertheless, the base-level connection remains and is amplified by the shared space and culture that they continually and variously inhabit.

## Leonard

Whilst searching through Gray’s recreated library at AGA, I found a copy of *Aeropagitica* which had an inscription within the front cover which denoted that it was a gift from Tom Leonard. This book contains what is considered to be one of the most influential philosophical defences of freedom of speech in history, and is entirely in keeping with the shared commitment of both Leonard and Gray to fight for such. Within the English-language literary tradition, Celtic voices have been perpetually discriminated against and repressed, creating what Leonard himself refers to as the “inequality of status of diction”; which is ultimately and fundamentally tied to class. By giving literary representation to these previously suppressed and marginalised working-class voices (an endeavour which was mirrored in Ireland in the Ulster playwright Brian Freil’s *Field Day* initiative in the 1980’s and 90’s), Leonard not only resists the traditional exclusion of these voices, he reclaims them and in so doing helps to redefine both the language and the literary canon.

AGA.2.5.1132. Milton, J. (1644) *Areopagitica*, Inside front cover, AGA 5.08,  
 Photograph: Rosa Armstrong, 2025



*Six Glasgow Poems* (1969) proudly and defiantly narrates a Glaswegian reality in a Glaswegian voice. By utilising the form of dialect poetry, the normal passport into the language that Scottish poets have hitherto employed, is not conferred. Indeed, Leonard makes a direct statement against those who cannot understand the language of the poems: “if yi canny unnirston thim jus clear off then.” As such, he not only defamiliarizes those who complacently expect their own privileged language to be present, he prioritises and empowers the Glaswegian reader instead: “ahmaz goodiz thi lota yiz so ah um/ ah no whit ahm daym.” Gray recognised and celebrated the significance of Leonard’s poetry in challenging the hegemonic power structures within language, so much so that he wrote a reimagined version of a Rilke verse, entitled ‘For Tom Leonard’ (2010); a whole-hearted acknowledgement as to the central importance of Leonard’s poetry for Scotland. This represents one of the four pillars in modern Celticism due to the prolonged recovery process of language, leading to the further and continued marginalisation of working-class dialects, in the Celtic nations. Both Scotland and Ireland had their native Gaelic language banned by the British Government, and both inherited Anglo-Scots and Anglo-Irish conventions regarding what literature should be and how it should sound. In this sense, Leonard belongs to the same history of language revival that includes those such as Hugh MacDiarmid and Sorley Maclean whose work recovered and revitalised a peculiarly Celtic sense of Scottish identity; Leonard goes one step further in his determination to voice the classism in these conventions. Therefore, Leonard, here, represents an important expression of this pillar of language and provides another important parallel from Gray’s Scottishness to his wider integration within the Celtic literary movement.

*Good Style*

helluva hard tay read theez init  
 stull  
 if yi canny unnirston thim jiss clear aff then  
 gawn  
 get tay fuck ootma road

ahmaz goodiz thi lota yiz so ah um  
 ah no whit ahm dayn  
 tellnyi  
 jiss try enny a yir fly patir wi me  
 stick thi bootnyi good style  
 so ah wull

Leonard, T. (1969) *Six Glasgow Poems*, Glasgow: The Other People

*For Tom Leonard*

On God the Tree’s Scottish branch new buds grow.  
 The feeblest prove it is no dead stick.  
 You flower and fruit,  
 drop seeds that take root.

Gray, A. (2010)  
*Collected Verse*, Two Ravens Press,

# Heaney

In contrast to Gray's mocking retelling of the history of the British islands and imperialism, in Seamus Heaney's 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing' (1975) the grave consequences of this troubled history are addressed as a current crisis of violence, discord and identity. The poem states (and dramatises) how "the times are out of joint", establishing the fundamental disorientation being experienced in Northern Ireland. From the words of the "English journalist" in the poem, there is the meaningfully flippant "Irish thing" that, for Heaney, is spectacularised under foreign lenses. The notion of a monolithic "Catholic Ireland" that Gray refers to is undermined by Heaney's present-day rejection of his Catholic heritage ("rosary beads" alongside the "jottings and analyses of politicians and newspapermen"), creating a deeper, more fragmented and ambiguous notion of modern Celtic identity in Northern Ireland. This anxious and ambivalent perspective is in sharp contrast to the famous, and famously self-assured, assertion of his fellow Northern Irish poet, John Hewitt, in *The Irish Times*:

"I'm an Ulsterman, of planter stock. I was born in the island of Ireland, so secondarily I'm an Irishman. I was born in the British archipelago and English is my native tongue, so I am British. The British archipelago consists of offshore islands to the continent of Europe, so I'm European"

Heaney, who shared Hewitt's non-sectarianism, cannot offer up the same clarity. He refuses the neatness of the terms and appellations that supposedly dictate his identity in his own community: "one side [is] as bad as the other, never worse." Heaney disavows what the Scottish thinker Tom Nairn described as "the temptations of identity": a "provincial stagnation" which either romanticises so-called essential national traits, or invokes rebellion as an imperative of national identity. As such, he mirrors MacNeice's equally disparaging description of Ireland in the poem 'Eclogue from Iceland' (1937):

I come from an island, Ireland, a nation  
Built upon violence and morose vendettas.  
My diehard countrymen like drayhorses  
Drag their ruin behind them.  
Shooting straight in the cause of crooked thinking  
Their greed is sugared with pretence of public spirit.  
From all which I am an exile.

Excerpt from: Auden, W. H. (1937) *Letters from Iceland*, Louis MacNeice, Faber and Faber.

In this sense, Heaney too is an exile: an exile who hasn't left. Furthermore, this deeply unstable and conflicted notion of self that Heaney pinpoints here stems from the same paradoxes and inconsistencies that Gray draws attention to in the formerly mentioned penultimate line of 'The Naming of Britain.' Heaney expresses this paradox throughout his poem, from the Northern Irish natives whose "open minds [are] as open as a trap", to the title itself: "Whatever you say, say nothing." The poem itself contradicts the title because he is saying something, and it is inevitably anxious, inevitably contested and inevitably complicated. Although Heaney admits to being tempted to "diagnose a rebirth in our plight", he laments that "the 'voice of sanity' is getting hoarse." Not only did Gray own a copy of Heaney's poems, he actively engaged with Heaney's context and subject, shown in his emphatic annotations. Gray and Heaney both "hug our little destiny again" through different but parallel poetical articulations of the contested modern identity of both Celtic nations.

# Conclusion

All of these poets, and all of them together, are seen trying to make sense of themselves, their own place in their own countries; trying to make sense, through poetry, of the linguistic, historical, cultural legacies and realities of the cities, countries and islands they were born in. As this brief survey has evidenced, these difficult and complicated endeavours of the Scots and the Ulstermen are in very many ways, shared. With the uncertainty, equivocation and reluctance to neatly claim identity in both Scottish and Northern Irish writers, it creates a togetherness of experience between them and amalgamates into a larger poetical tradition of Celticism; one that Gray is undoubtedly a part of.



*The Four Pillars of Modern Poetical Celticism*

Illustration: Abby Carter, 2025

# Naming Britain

In three hundred and thirty B.C. when ships always tried to sail within sight of land, at the west exit from earth's middle sea DON'T GO THROUGH was carved. That small straight led to the ocean that keeps moving its bed, drowning beaches twice between noon and noon and twice uncovering them, pulled by the moon.

It was hard to sail by such coasts without splitting keel on reef or running around, but possible, as traders from Carthage found who sailed out with bolts of cloth, returned with tin, carved DON'T GO THROUGHT to keep competitors in and stationed warships to make their command obeyed. The galley of Pytheas slipped through that blockade.

He was a Greek when Greece had markets on every Mediterranean shore, and learned from neighbour nations more techniques than discussed in one language before. Greeks thought all knowledge theirs to explore, enlarge, record for their extrovert civilisation. That thought drove Pytheas to Atlantic navigation.

His boat, oar-propelled with one square sail like those in which Vikings cruised to America, found an archipelago. From a tribe there he took a name for it used in a Greek geography book a name that Romans spelled BRITANIA, but during and after the Roman occupation Britain was never the name of a single nation.

Only Wales could claim the old British name when Angles, Saxons, Danes and Normans conquered South Britain, fighting till they became one kingdom, England, which then fought to subjugate every adjacent state. Ireland was first colony of her empire overseas. She conquered Wales. France and Scotland won free.

Scotland was free will King James got news that he could inherit England's crown too if he lived there, and offer he did not refuse so like many Scots went to London where now, Britain's chief landlord, he signed parliamentary acts to make these islands one kingdom despite contradictory facts.

England and Scotland's clergy held different kinds of Protestant creed - hating Papists was the main point on which they agreed, while Catholic Ireland constantly rebelled against English landlords who bloodily quelled their attempts to reject the South British yoke. How could a Scots king unite such folk?

King James, with the force of English arms, evicted most owners of Ulster farms, gave their land to Protestant Scots whose immigration diluted the native Catholic population who never again (thought James) could trouble his nation. Such overseas meddling brought again and again more and worse centuries of political pain.

To gain an empire on which the sun never set, the English explored, traded, fought and won mastery of the sea and vast subcontinents, helped by Scots and Irish whose parliaments were both in the past, but left such outsiders a say in the British Empire, though the USA, hating taxation by London, had broken away.

To make folk see these islands were one Britain's Postmaster General called Scotland N.B. - North Britain - and Ireland W.B., until West British rebels one Easter Day seized Dublin Post Office, raised a tricolour flag, made England's first colony follow the USA when all but six Irish counties broke away.

National empires end. Britain's did - Russia's too. Commercial empire remains promoting war with drug and weapon sales while parliaments in Ulster, Scotland, Wales do not stop the English government sending their troops to fight in distant lands when America's chief war-businessman commands.

Ulster-Protestants may be the last to gladly claim the British name. Britain is still that irregular archipelago to which Pytheas came.

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At the time of writing, Rosa was an undergraduate student of English Literature at the University of Strathclyde.

**Design by Abby Carter, 2025**

**#827f4e as used in:**

Gray, A. (1964), *Cowcaddens Streetscape in the Fifties*, oil on hard board, 121.5x224 cm

**See Page 4**

