



Making History

Archaeologist and presenter Neil Oliver describes his belief in the value of history and his involvement in the making of BBC Scotland's ten-part series *A History of Scotland*. He makes a case



Neil Oliver

for having a BBC presence in Scotland, not just a single site but in different localities to achieve global reach with local feel.

Born in Renfrew and brought up in Dumfriesshire, I'm Scottish through and through. I went to university in Glasgow, I've lived in both Glasgow and Edinburgh, and at the moment my family and I live in Stirling. I didn't begin my career as a historian; I read archaeology at university, and came to specialise in military archaeology. Battlefields were my passion; but of course I needed the historical context of the battle, and so history was inevitably the broad brushstroke against which I could investigate the fine details of archaeological work.

It was the battlefields of South Africa that first drew me into working for the BBC. I'd always wanted to explore the sites of the Victorian British Zulu war – the subject of one of my favourite films, the 1964 Michael Caine picture *Zulu* – and consequently my good friend Tony Pollard and I made a TV series for BBC Two called *Two Men in a Trench*, which explored different British battlefields. Straight after that I worked on the BBC series *Coast*, which was based in BBC Birmingham.

A History of Scotland is my first direct project with BBC Scotland. I was approached about it in 2006. I knew from the start that this was a landmark programme on a huge scale: it was to be a ten-part series covering 2,000 years of Scottish history. It was very exciting to have my name associated with

Opposite: Coast

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telling the story of my own country; and the way in which it was to be made – the vast scale and attention to detail – made for ground-breaking television.

It was a happy coincidence that I was in the right place at the right time. A programme like this probably won’t be made for at least another 10 or 20 years. But this particular telling of the history of Scotland is unique, because it is coloured by the time in which it is told: the moment of making is critical because the present is continually shaping the lens through which we see the past. The personality of the teller will also influence the way the story is told, and I hope I have brought my own particular love of Scotland to the programme, as well as my abilities as a historian and archaeologist.

Most of the team on *A History of Scotland* are born and bred Scots. The series producer, Richard Downes, is originally from England, although he has lived in Glasgow for 20 years. Like other people who have chosen to settle here, Richard brings objectivity with him. This objectivity helps to prevent our perspective becoming inward looking; for this reason, I’m a great believer in having a mixture of lifers and incomers on a programme. It reinvigorates the environment.

A History of Scotland has come out of the heart of Scotland itself: from the local communities and through the voices of the people, so that the stories told are an accurate reflection of the land and the people. I started work as a journalist on local papers. I worked in Dumfriesshire and in East Lothian, which is a separate region, east of Edinburgh. A local paper lives and breathes with the community that it’s reporting upon; it reflects the true feelings of the people in their stories. It takes into account local sensibilities and is sensitive to local history. And I believe that this is the way that programmes should be made. For an organisation like the BBC to have a presence in Scotland, and not just a single site, but in different localities around the country, means that you’ve got global reach with local feel. There are no shortcuts to

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achieving this: you need to have people who are from there, who have always been there, who want to work there. So I think for the BBC to have a presence in Scotland, and all over Scotland, is irreplaceable.

There is huge weight behind *A History of Scotland*; it’s not just a television series; it has also got radio and online presence. A lot of work has been generated from the programme: the music, for example, was specially composed and performed by the Scottish Symphony Orchestra. As a result of the series there has been a great deal of outreach work in schools, both primary and secondary, which is important; history, particularly the teaching of Scottish history, has unfortunately been neglected in Scottish schools. There is also an involvement with the Open University. Anything that stirs up interest in our own history and helps people make the link between the past and present is a positive thing. History is everything. If you don’t have an awareness of history, then you may as well be living your

life on just one page of a novel. Understanding the past can help us to make better educated guesses about the future, because we can see the pattern and feel the rhythm of life.



Coast

Overleaf: *A History of Scotland*



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We’ve travelled all over Scotland to make the series. The history of the twentieth century concentrates in places like Lanarkshire, Ayrshire and Glasgow, where the industrial revolution has put down its roots. But we’ve also been to further-flung areas, such as Shetland, where we went to record the annual Viking festival held in the darkest part of the year. We’ve visited the beautiful island of Iona and travelled all along the landscapes of the west and north coasts. There has been a substantial amount of filming in Stirling, as so much Scottish history has been spun there. But the impact of this series is much bigger than the scope of Scotland itself. You can’t tell the history of Scotland without reference to England, Wales, Ireland and Northern Ireland. The nations of the United Kingdom are like tenants in a shared house: they can’t live truly separate lives because they are all in the same building. It’s good to have different perspectives on the same story. There is nowhere you can stand and look at the whole history of the United Kingdom without viewing it through a fractured prism – a cracked lens. There is no perfect ‘true’ view. But all perspectives are equally valid. Seeing our shared history from the viewpoint of Scotland should be interesting to everyone, whether they come from Donegal or Penzance or the east coast of England.

In fact, one of my first questions when they approached me to see if I would be interested in the programme was about

the distribution; I wanted to ensure that it was going to be shown in the rest of the United Kingdom. I didn’t want to do a domestic insular history of Scotland that was only going to be viewed by the Scots. After all, there’s no point just singing to your Aunty; you want a wider audience. I was so convinced about it that I was prepared to insist that I would only do it if it was going to get a network transmission.

When people think of Scotland they tend to think of the landscape itself; a place that has been romanticised by Robert Burns and Walter Scott. Certainly, the landscape is stunning. Scotland is composed of some of the oldest rock on planet earth. But the landscape is a backdrop; what brings glitter to history, what brings it to life, are the actors – the inhabitants that have lived here for 12,000 years. History is a story populated with people and it is the people who create it, tell it, interpret it and live it. It is the human stories that matter: they shape our world and the way we live, and teach us about our own humanity. ■

Neil Oliver is a Scottish archaeologist, historian, author and broadcaster, known partly for his distinctive voice and long black hair. He grew up in Ayr and Dumfries before attending Glasgow University to study archaeology. He is best known as a presenter of the documentary series, *Coast*. Neil’s television debut came in 2002 with BBC Two’s *Two Men in a Trench*, which featured Neil and close friend, Tony Pollard, visiting historic British battlefields and recreating the battle situation using state of the art archaeological techniques. Neil’s latest series is *A History of Scotland*. The series also has links to radio, online and Open University materials. Like *Coast*, the programme is a co-production between the BBC and the Open University.

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