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SCOTLAND *on* SUNDAY

Perfumed effigy of 'Butcher' Duke raises a stink in the Highlands

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Meekyoung Shin works on her soap statue of the Duke of Cumberland.

HE WAS known as "Butcher" Cumberland, the perpetrator of a bloody stain on Scots history that will never be washed clean. Yet a new statue to the English Duke is to be unveiled.

The life-size statue of Prince William Augustus on a horse is to be erected in Cavendish Square, London, later this month on the exact spot where his previous effigy – removed in the 19th century because of his 'war crimes' – once stood.

The statue will be made of soap, as part of a City of Sculpture art project, and will eventually melt away, but the work has provoked anger in Highland Scotland where "Butcher" Cumberland is still reviled.

South Korean artist Meekyoung Shin became intrigued by the empty Cavendish Square plinth on her frequent visits to London. She is renowned worldwide for soap sculptures that are deliberately allowed to erode to convey the temporary nature of historic events and how they are differently perceived as time passes.

According to the Haunch of Venison gallery in London, which showcases Shin's work, the one-year-project "is supposed to bring focus to the passage of time as the sculpture weathers.

"As the sculpture erodes, the scented soap will disintegrate and release a perfumed aroma. The details of the statue will soften and fade over time, symbolising the mutable meanings we attach to public monuments and, in a wider sense, to all aspects of history."

The Duke – the younger son of King George II – put down the Jacobite uprising at the Battle of Culloden on the 16 April, 1746. However, it was the barbarity of his orders that have echoed down through history. The Duke insisted that no quarter be given to the wounded and, after the battle, his men spent hours scouring the battlefield bayoneting to death any wounded rebels.

Over the next few weeks Cumberland and his forces swept through the Highlands killing suspected Jacobites, confiscating livestock and torching villages. However, many in Scotland and across Britain supported his actions and were pleased the Jacobite rebellion had been suppressed. Glasgow University presented the Duke with an honorary degree and in 1770, five years after his death, his statue was financed by a wealthy officer who said he owed the Duke a debt of gratitude.

This was despite an undistinguished military career after Culloden and rising disquiet about his methods. So low did his reputation sink that the statue was removed to a secret destination in 1868, leaving the stone and an inscription.

Shin, 45, said an art gallery curator had suggested creating something for the empty plinth in 2008. "This led me to think about the plinth and why it had remained empty.

"As monuments are built, removed, replaced, or relocated geographically, we are reminded that history can be mistranslated and miscontextualised. In this sense, the empty plinth provided the impetus to trace a part of history that had literally been erased and the recreation of it prompts us to reflect upon these very issues as the soap weathers and the sculpture physically disappears again throughout the duration of its display."

She added: "I have, of course, been aware of the politically sensitive relationship Scotland has with England but I was not fully aware of the resurgence in the issue in recent times. The fact that the Duke was such a politically controversial figure brings an unexpected and interesting dimension to the work and brings to light the issues I wanted to explore through this project."

Paul Scott, the president of the Saltire Society, said: "I think this is terrible idea. He was the 'Butcher of Culloden' who not only massacred wounded men on the field of battle but tracked down and killed many Jacobites in the days and weeks after Culloden. As far as I know he had few redeeming features and is certainly not deserving of a statue. The plinth should be left empty."

Roderick Balfour, an independent councillor for Culloden said: "I know the people round here would regard it as an affront, even though it is a soap statue and might wash away pretty quickly. This is not the kind of thing that will improve relations between the Highlands and England."

But Councillor Robert Davis, deputy leader of Westminster City Council, which granted permission for the new Arts-Council-funded statue, defended the plans and insisted Scots should not take offence. He said: "This statue is a temporary soap figure which recreates the original 18th-century statue. The fact it will erode due to the weather is part of the artist's broader comment about changing perceptions of history over time.

"I am sure that the many Scots who visit and work in London are not going to be offended, any more than English visitors to Scotland would be provoked by statues of William Wallace or Robert the Bruce. The City of Sculpture festival, of which this piece is a part, is about providing thought-provoking public art rather than reheating ancient historical grievances. I am confident viewers of the statue will see it in that light."

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