

# EMPIRE RETOLD

In 1938, a huge British Empire Exhibition took place in Bellahouston Park, in the southside of Glasgow. The park was transformed into a mini-city of striking modernist architecture, wide boulevards, and fountains. Its purpose was to showcase the achievements of the British Empire, promote trade, and strengthen imperial relationships across the world. It attracted around 13 million visitors during its six-month duration, yet today there is little evidence remaining in Bellahouston Park and most people are unaware of this event.

With the outbreak of WW2 in 1939, this was the last ever British Empire Exhibition and the event remains relevant to the study of British social, cultural, economic, industrial, and political history. However, in contemporary times, it is crucial to re-examine the impact of colonialism and the legacies left by the British Empire.

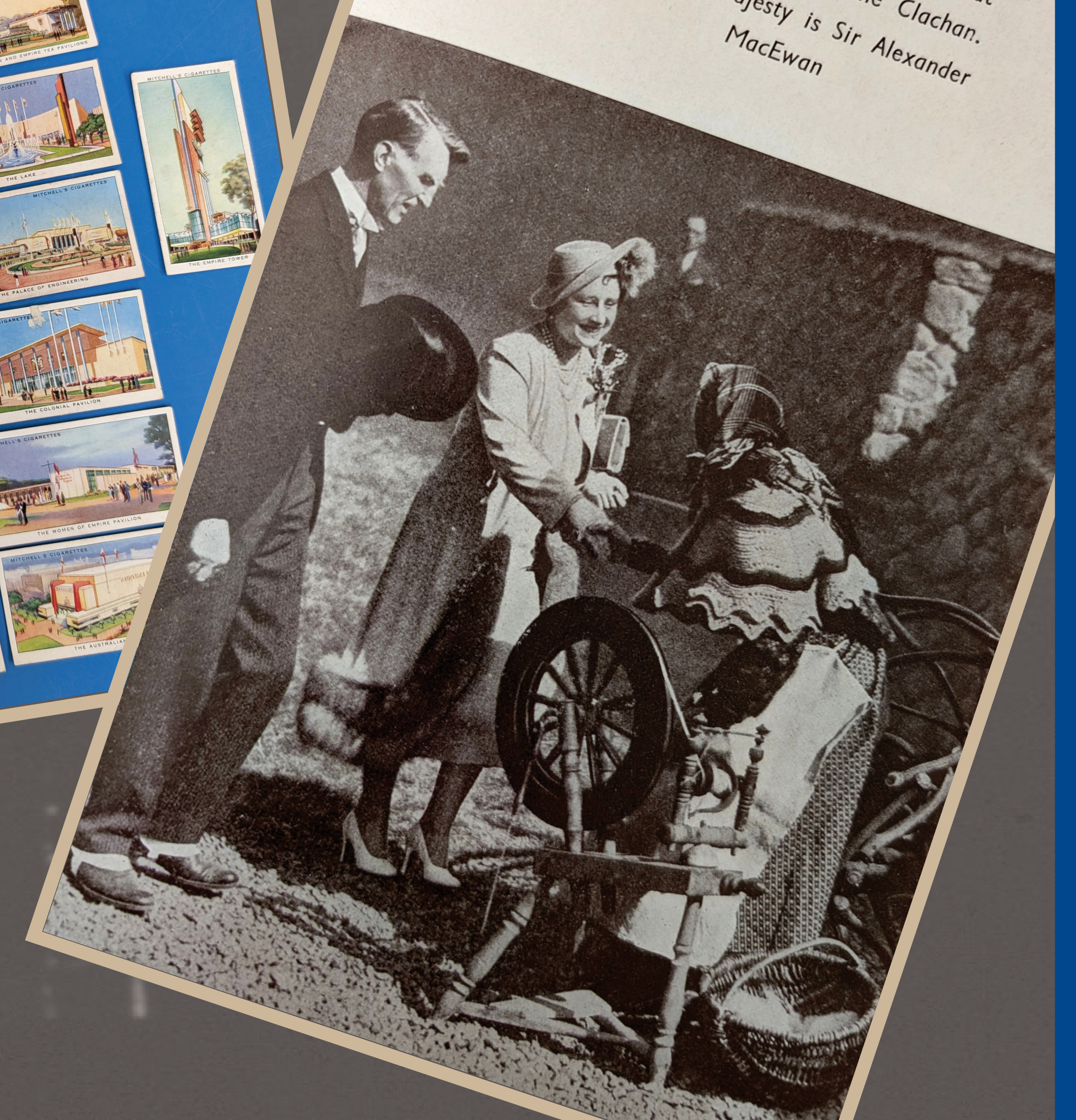
The Empire Retold project explored what contemporary Glaswegians think about the Empire Exhibition that took place in the city. The aims of the project are to deepen knowledge of local history and communities and to give a more rounded and representative view of British heritage.

Please note, these display boards include historical material and personal stories that reflect a range of attitudes, language, and beliefs, some of which have been, or still are, discriminatory. These perspectives are presented as part of an honest exploration of history and do not necessarily represent views of the project team or institution.

Read more about the project here



Cigarette cards showing some of the Exhibition pavilions



The Queen has a charming smile for Mary Morrison, who works at the spinning-wheel in the Clachan. With Her Majesty is Sir Alexander MacEwan

The Empire Exhibition was a great thing for Glasgow. It's the best thing that ever happened to Glasgow in my opinion! Glasgow resident who visited the exhibition as a child. 2007.

These are false narratives about people from other places and false narratives around gender. Research participant. 2025.

When you think how grim the thirties must have been for many, what a boost the exhibition must have been for the city and its people. Glasgow resident, 2024.

So the great exhibition receives its Royal sendoff, the show that glorifies the British character, the British spirit and determination, the British will to win. It is not enough that we should possess all these; we must tell the world about them and that's Scotland's job at Bellahouston Park! British Pathé news footage, 1938.

If the exhibition was done now there would be more of a public backlash. Research participant. 2025.

The promotion of Imperial brotherhood was, of course, highly idealistic and masked the real diplomatic and political tensions within the Empire at that time. [...] It provided a late snapshot of a British Empire glamorously reframed using up-to-date architecture and design as masks to conceal an accelerating decline. Bruce Peter, 2025. "Art Deco Scotland: Design and Architecture in the Jazz Age" Historic Environment Scotland.



# BELLAHOUSTON PARK, THEN AND NOW

The Palace of Art is the only building from the 1938 Empire Exhibition which remains in Bellahouston Park. It was designed by Launcelot Ross (1885-1956) to house the Glasgow Corporation's art collection. In 1951 the building was converted to community use and became a sports hall in 1968. Early in the 2000s, it re-opened after refurbishment and extensive improvements, as Bellahouston Leisure Centre.<sup>1</sup>

If the plan of the Exhibition is studied carefully and matched against Bellahouston Park as it is today, some sense of what was there can be glimpsed through depressions in the ground indicating grassed-over foundations, paths, and roadways.

Find the Foundation Stone, within what would have been the Atlantic Restaurant, shaped like a ship.



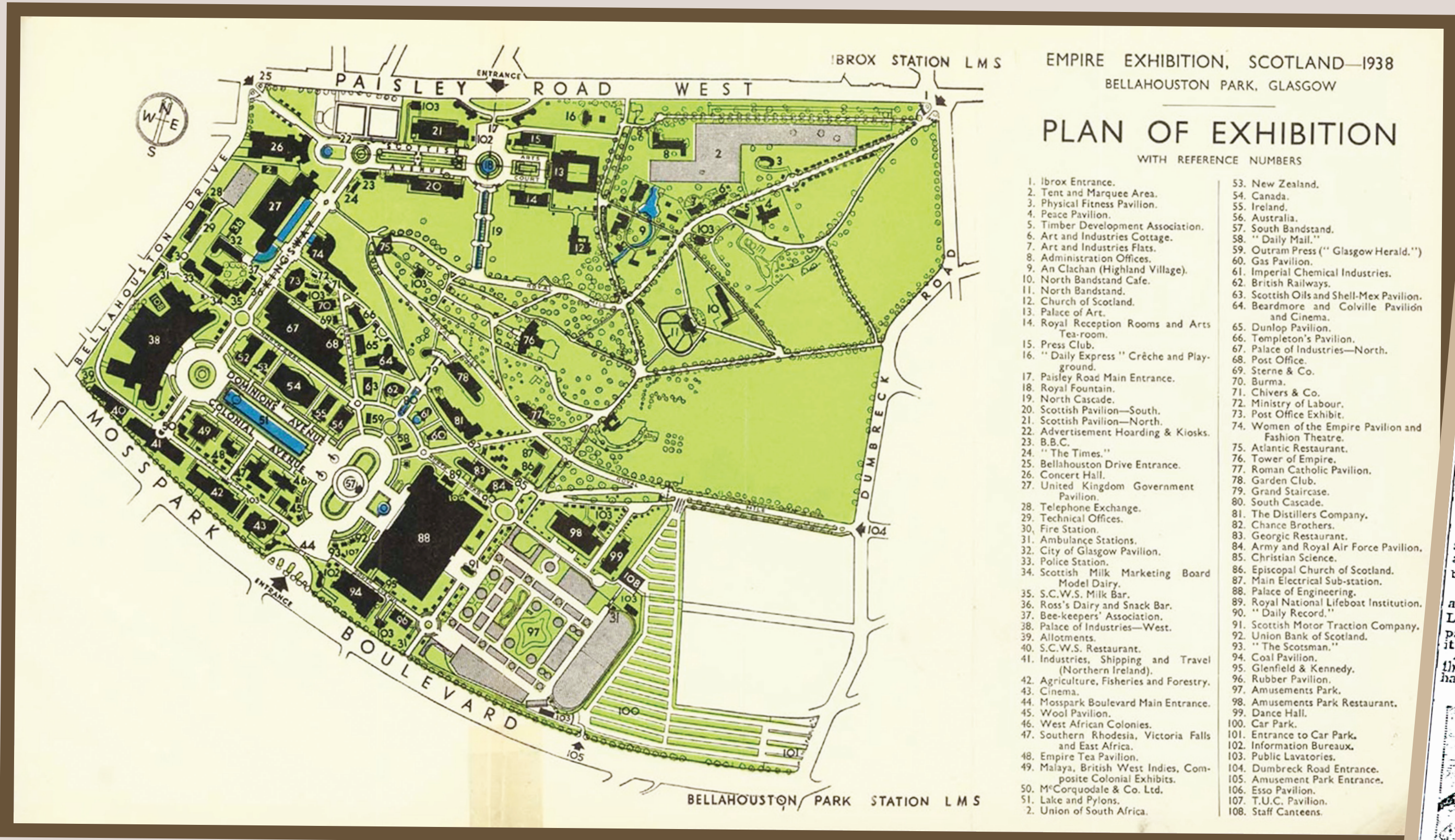
Three views of the site of Atlantic Restaurant.



Photograph of a work outing outside the Palace of Art. The pig costume suggests that the firm may have been involved in the production of sausages or meat pies. © Stanley K Hunter, Scottish Exhibitions Study Group. Licenser www.scran.ac.uk

Walk along what was once Colonial Avenue or spot grassed over paths that are no longer used.

My house was built because of the exhibition - it was farmland here and I suppose it didn't look good, so they built houses. I've got brick at the back of mine but the ones you can see from the park have sandstone; maybe they thought the King would see them! Research participant. 2025.



Climb Bellahouston Hill to locate the remains of the Tower of Empire, the focal point of the 1938 Empire Exhibition.



The site of the foundation of the Tower of Empire.

Why aren't children taught about this in school? Research participant. 2025.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theglasgowstory.com/image/?inum=TGSE01309>



# DIFFERENT STORIES, MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

The project takes a ‘polyvocal’ approach, meaning that all perspectives and opinions are valid, even if they are contradictory. It also includes some of the counter-narratives, wider contexts, and different interpretations of the Exhibition, from 1938 to today.

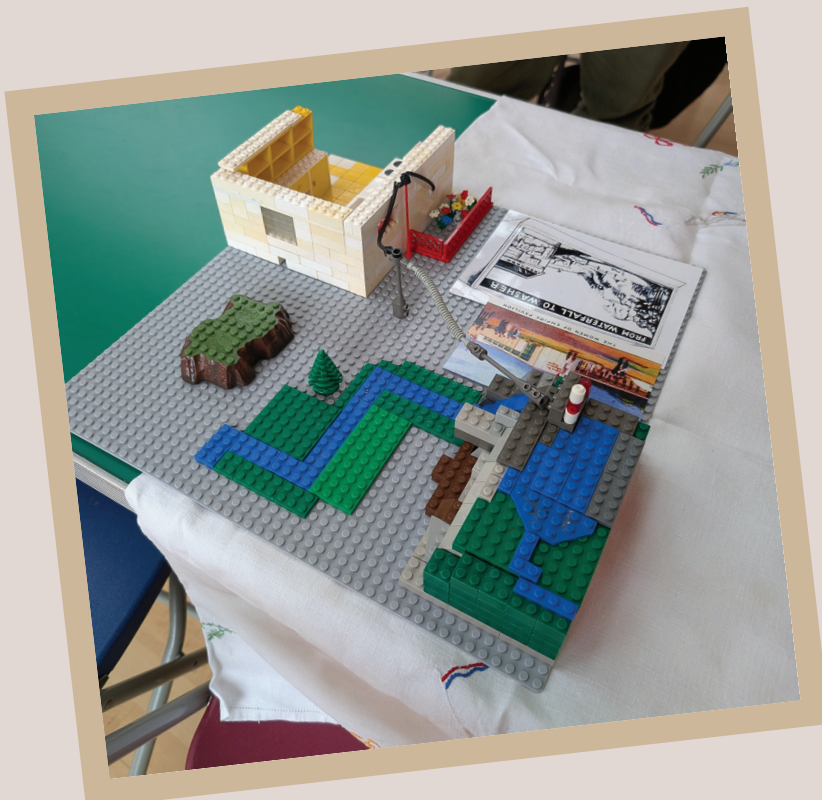
As part of project workshops local people were asked to respond to images from the Empire Exhibition archive (you can see these for yourself at <http://empireexhibition.com/>). Participants included people who live near Bellahouston, people of global majority ethnicities, people who have lived in Glasgow their whole lives, and recent immigrants to Glasgow. This project also uses interviews from with Glaswegians who had actually visited the Exhibition as children, recorded in 2007. Researchers and participants were supported with anti-racism training and counselling.

This approach emphasises the fact that history is not a single narrative, there are multiple interpretations of the Exhibition, both now and then, and different ways of viewing Britain’s colonialist past.

It was a fairyland in a way... Glasgow resident who visited the exhibition as a child. 2007.



© Courtesy of HES (Collection of photographs relating to the Empire Exhibition, Glasgow, Scotland)



A Lego reconstruction of a diorama about hydroelectricity that was featured in Women of Empire Pavilion. The diorama was called From Waterfall to Washer. Lego by Nina Baker.

An all-embracing and vociferous anti-imperial ‘counter-exhibition’ staged by the Glasgow Independent Labour Party to coincide with the 1938 Glasgow Empire Exhibition [...] the Workers’ Exhibition was both an explicit political statement and an impassioned critique of imperialism [...] the objective of which was to attack everything that the main Empire Exhibition stood for. Sarah Britton, ‘Come and See the Empire by the All Red Route!’: Anti-Imperialism and Exhibitions in Interwar Britain, *History Workshop Journal*, Volume 69, Issue 1, Spring 2007.

People who visited the Exhibition knew more about the reality of the empire than they did before – they maybe didn’t understand the details or the subjugation but at least they knew more than before. Research participant. 2025.

On May 3 of this year Their Majesties returned to Bellahouston to perform the opening ceremony.

On the first occasion when they visited Bellahouston there were only twenty girders on the Palace of Engineering and six on the Palace of Industry; on the second the Exhibition was completed, in spite of the fact that in the intervening period a serious strike had occurred.

I think Glasgow can in all modesty claim that this was a tremendous accomplishment—and also, in its way, a mute testimony to Clyde workmanship. Scottish people are extremely proud of their Exhibition—and they have good reason to be. Certainly this Exhibition beats anything in my experience.

Capt. S.J. Graham, General Manager of the Exhibition in the Empire Exhibition 1938 Souvenir Booklet.

## “ GIRAFFE ” NECKS

The Padaung tribe of Burmah is noteworthy for its “giraffe-necked” women. Malleable brass rods about half an inch in diameter are wound round and round the necks of the girls from the earliest childhood. Many girls die of the gangrenous sores caused by chafing of the brass; but, as a girl’s beauty and value in marriage market depend on the length of her neck, the Padaung women aim at longer and yet longer necks. A girl with over 20 rings round her neck is not uncommon. Similar brass rods are also twisted round the calves of the women’s legs. The Padaung woman does not wash her neck—she cannot get at it; but she is careful to polish the brass round it and round her legs. In spite of their long necks the women carry heavy loads on their backs, supported by a strap passing over the forehead, and they appear to do most of the field work besides carrying wood and water.”

Framlingham Weekly News - Saturday 15 October 1938 Image © Lanman Museum c/o Maulden Family. Image created courtesy of THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD.



Glasgow Herald, March 7, 1938

## DON'T READ THIS (You may think it Seditious!)

If you want to help and the tyranny of British Imperialism there are two things which you must do. The first is to support the workers' organisations in the Empire which are fighting for political and economic freedom and justice. The second is to support in Britain, the political organisation which is fighting Imperialism without compromise. In India and Ceylon, the Socialist Parties are putting up a great fight on behalf of the workers. If you are specially interested in their struggle, a letter addressed to the I.L.P., 35, St. Bride Street, London, E.C.4, will bring you particulars. The workers' organisations in Africa and the West Indies are represented by the International African Service Bureau, which takes up their political and economic grievances and assists them in the development of trades unions, etc. The Bureau publishes a monthly paper, "International African Opinion," which costs only 3/6 a year, and supplies speakers for Trade Union and other meetings, and publishes other literature. You should write for full particulars to the Secretary of the Bureau, T. R. Makonnen, 120 Westbourne Grove, London, W.2. In Britain, the only political party which is putting up an uncompromising struggle against Imperialism is the I.L.P. The official leadership of the Labour Party advocates the Mandates system under the League of Nations. Experience of the Mandates system has shown that all the worst features of Capitalist exploitation continue. The new policy of the Communist Party in advocating alliances with sections of the Capitalist class through the Popular Front also means the sacrifice of the struggle of the Colonial workers, because the Capitalist class will not willingly let go of the Empire. The French Popular Front Government has cruelly suppressed the African workers in the French Empire. The I.L.P. recognises the right of the Indian and Colonial peoples to national independence and supports enthusiastically the struggle of the Colonial workers to throw off the tyranny of Capitalist Imperialism. To learn more of the struggle against Imperialism you should read the "New Leader," the I.L.P. paper (it is only 6d. weekly). To get particulars of the I.L.P. (including how you can get the "New Leader") you should write to the Secretary, I.L.P., 35, St. Bride Street, London, E.C.4. Published by the Workers' Empire Exhibition Committee and printed in Great Britain by the National Labour Press Ltd., 35 St. Bride Street, London, E.C.4.

Extract from the ‘Come and See the Empire by the All Red Route!’ counter-exhibition pamphlet.

I used to spend a lot of time there because it was a wonderful place. Glasgow resident who visited the exhibition as a child. 2007.

## GLASGOW EXHIBITION STRIKE.

One thousand workers at the Empire Exhibition were on strike yesterday. They are all members of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers. About 200 joiners had previously gone on strike, and yesterday 800 workers, not of the same union, agreed to give them their support. It is understood the union is giving its support to the joiners' demand for a penny an hour "dirty money," but a more important demand for 3d an hour extra is not likely to be recognised by the union.

Northern Whig - Tuesday 01 March 1938 Image created courtesy of THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD.

The Giraffe Women<sup>2</sup> were a highlight. But recently I’ve been thinking about what it must have been like for them. Brought from a hot, dry country to a very wet Glasgow, and put on show for people to gawk at. Small children were scared of them and hid behind their mother’s back. Others just stood and looked at these strange people. “My mother’s memory of a visit.” Retold by Research participant. 2025.

For my grandfather, the Empire Exhibition was immensely exciting. But he wasn’t an imperialist. He never really was very comfortable with people bossing other people about to be honest. So when he took his boys down to the Empire Exhibition, they were all very excited to see it. Because for them, it was all about progress and science. And the bright new world that he was confident was just around the corner. Story by Shona MacIver about her uncle’s visit to the Empire Exhibition as a boy.

<sup>2</sup> Giraffe Women or Giraffe-necked Women was a term widely used for the Padaung tribe of Burma who toured as part of many exhibitions at the time.



# EMPIRE RETOLD: AUGMENTED REALITY NARRATIVES

Stories and comments from the project workshops have been used to create three multimedia narratives which you can experience whilst walking around Bellahouston Park. These stories are delivered through a mobile phone app and can be experienced playfully, recreationally, or academically.

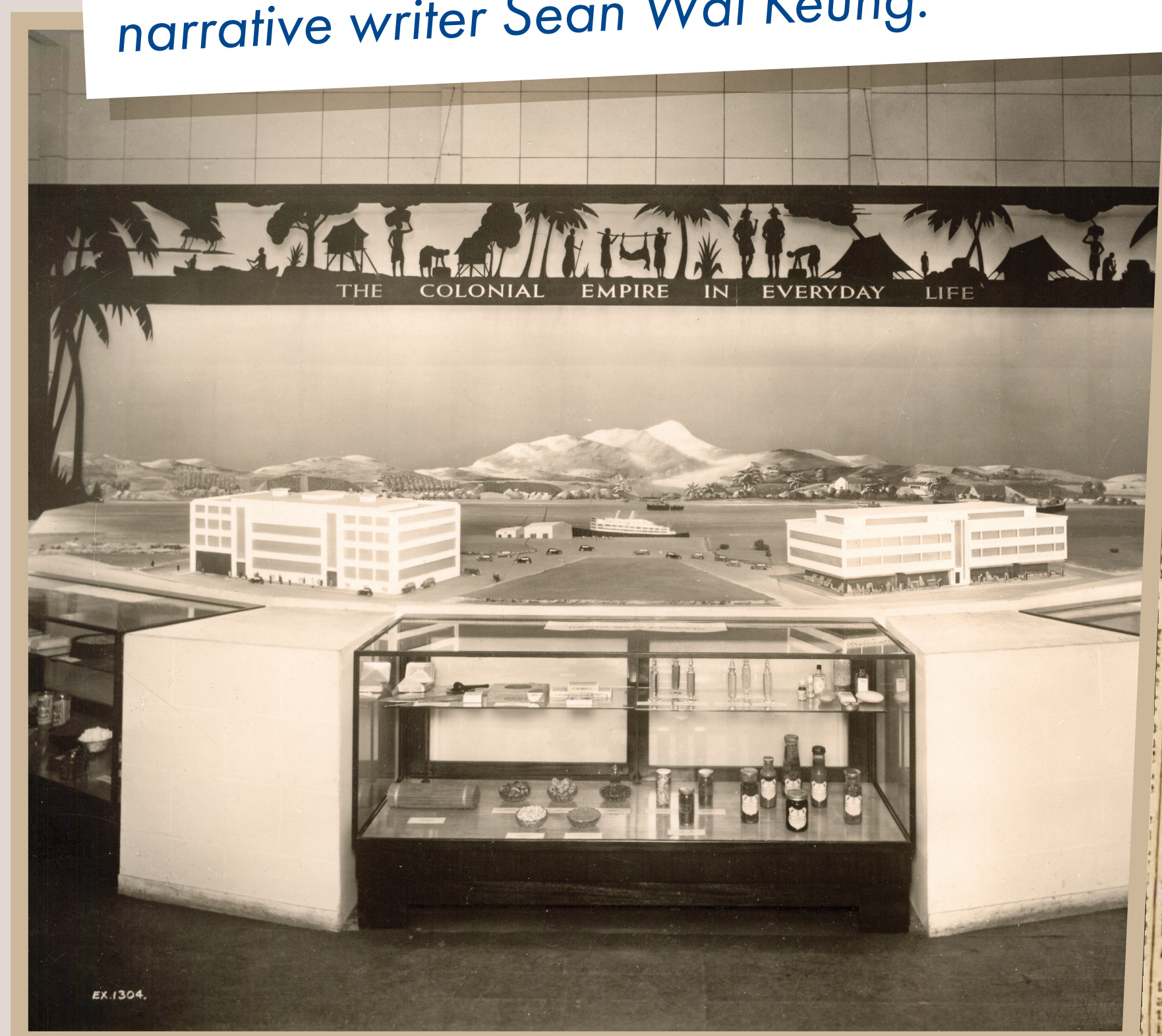
- 'Reunion of Stone: In the Shadow of the Empire'
- 'Branches & Roots: Spirits of the Empire Exhibition'
- 'Interference'

The stories were devised and created by three local writers. Each story links real places in Bellahouston Park with the past and present using archival images and audio, quotes from the workshops, images from a 3D model of the exhibition, and creative interpretations.

Augmented Reality (AR) is an effective way of layering different narratives onto real places. It allows multiple histories to be represented and encourages links between traditional historical perspectives and contemporary understandings of the Exhibition and its legacies. Please use the app and reflect on your own connections to Glasgow, colonialism, anti-racism, and identity.

You can download the app for Apple or Android phones, search for “Empire Retold: Bellahouston AR”.

While much has changed in Bellahouston Park between 1938 and today, the placement and prominence of trees remains a common thread linking the two time-points. Because of this, *Branches & Roots: Spirits of the Empire* Exhibition offers the chance to be part of an inter-generational discussion on the sights, sounds, merits and ethics of the Empire Exhibition as seen through the eyes of two trees with differing perspectives on how we should remember the past. AR narrative writer Sean Wai Keung.



The central diorama in the Colonial Pavilion depicted aspects of everyday life in the Colonies and contained examples of the products shipped to Britain. © Stanley K Hunter, Scottish Exhibitions Study Group. Licensor [www.scran.ac.uk](http://www.scran.ac.uk)



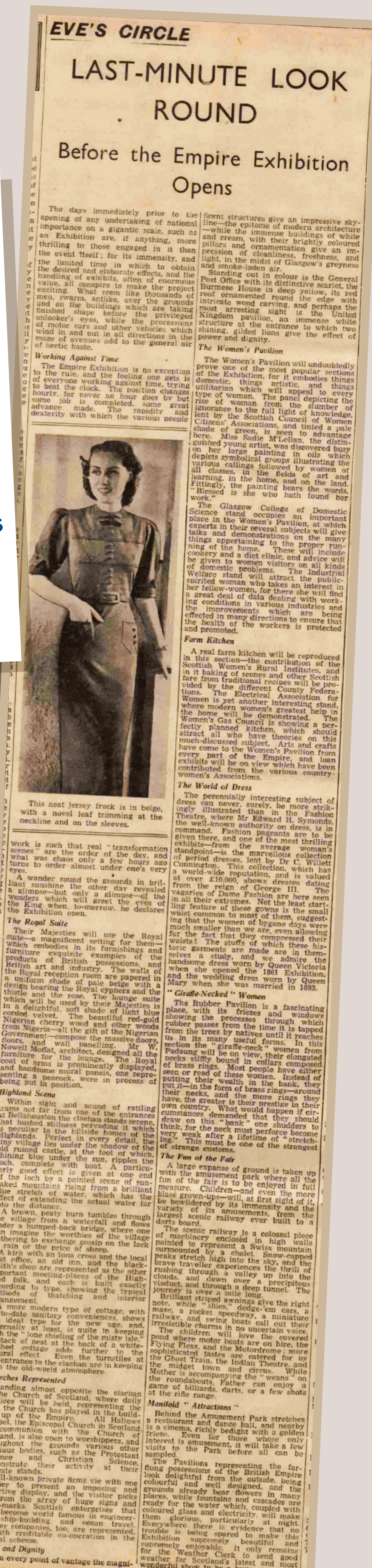
Aerial view of Bellahouston, with and without the 3D model of the Empire Exhibition overlaid.



Multiple representations of the Tower of Empire (a.k.a. Tait's Tower).

Tune into the radio and travel back to 1938 Glasgow. As the city celebrates the Empire Exhibition, a group of local workers have hijacked the airwaves... Can they cut through the noise to tell the people's story of Empire? AR narrative writer Sara Missaghian-Schirazi.

Statues have long borne silent witness to the history unfolding around them, but what if they could move and even speak? Locate the lost statues from the 1938 Empire Exhibition and hear their forgotten stories in *Reunion of Stone: In the Shadow of the Empire*. AR narrative writer Rachel Gorry.



Edinburgh Evening News - Monday 02 May 1938 Image  
© National World Publishing Ltd. Image created courtesy  
of THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD.



Labour critic: Tom McCubbin with a model of Tait's Tower, the Tower of Empire from the 1938 Glasgow Empire Exhibition. Picture: Allan Milligan

# Angry Tait-a-Tait over Tower of Empire

**By Alan Forbes**

AN ATTEMPT by Glasgow's Labour leader, Pat Lally, to have the "Tower" from the city's 1938 Empire Exhibition rebuilt has stirred up another controversy.

Tom McCubbin, a surviving member of the family whose firm built the 300ft tower in Bellahouston Park, has accused Mr Lally of promoting the reconstruction for political gain. He said that Labour should take no credit for saving the tower because the old Labour-run corporation was responsible for its demolition after the exhibition.

It has been a frustrating few days for Mr McCubbin since Mr Lally announced on Wednesday

'The tower would have been demolished about a year before the start of the Second World War. If the corporation knew that war was coming, why didn't they let everyone else know?'

The councillors refused, saying that the corporation was not able to afford the tower's upkeep.

"I would like to see the tower rebuilt, but I object to these myths about the tower. I understand one television programme suggested that an aeroplane seen on film flying past the tower might have been a German spotter plane.

"It was probably a pleasure flight, and it is quite likely that the pilot was George Pinkerton, who shot the first German plane over the Fort."

Mr Lally was not available for comment last evening.

Newspaper clipping showing differences of opinion in 1995.



# DECOLONISING AN INHERENTLY COLONIALIST EVENT?

This project aims to support a more 'decolonised' reading of the Empire Exhibition of 1938 by bringing to light some of the forgotten histories and minority views of this aspect of Glasgow's history.

Decolonisation is a term used during conversations about restorative justice, Indigenous rights, and anti-racism. It recognises that colonialism has social, cultural, and psychological effects. In this context, decolonising means "deconstructing or dismantling colonial ideologies and challenging the superiority of western thought and approaches."<sup>3</sup> This involves questioning who had (and still has) the power over knowledge of history and trying to decentre this power by working with those who were (and still are) marginalised.

This project aims to capture the complexity, incompleteness and "disorder"<sup>4</sup> of attempting to decolonise history and heritage.

Decolonisation is not about telling an alternate narrative but about creating a space for multiple narratives. Research participant. 2025.



Savage West Africa, part of the Billy Bulins amusement park adjacent to the Exhibition.



Graffiti at the Empire Exhibition monument, Bellahouston Park, 28 Feb 2021 © Benjamin Thomas White. The text reads "The colonial regime owes its legitimacy to force and at no time does it ever endeavour to cover up this nature of things." From Fanon, Frantz, 1961, "The Wretched of the Earth".

Looking at the Savage West Africa exhibition, which is just such an offensive name, it's like a kind of weird caricature of what people thought the whole continent of Africa was all about. Research participant. 2025.



© Newsquest (Herald & Times). Licensor www.scran.ac.uk



Poster displayed at the Women of Empire Pavilion.

You can't blame people for the way they talked about other nationalities, it was a different time! Character from AR story, 2025



The South Africa pavilion was built as an enlarged version of an early Dutch settler's house. The building was later transported to Ardeer in Ayrshire, becoming "Africa House", the canteen for ICI Chemicals. It was suddenly demolished after falling into disrepair in the 1990s. In 2025, there are plans to rebuild it...

## GIRAFFE-NECKED WOMAN'S BABY

To be Called "Bella Houston"

A BABY girl has been born to one of the giraffe-necked women who are appearing in the Amusement Park at the Empire Exhibition. The birth took place in a private nursing home in Glasgow. The mother, 22-years-old Mu Swai, and her baby are both doing well. The infant is a normal, healthy child of 6 lbs 15 ozs. Mu Swai's husband, Maung Suri, was beaming with delight when seen at the Exhibition yesterday morning. He had in his arms his first born, Peter Olympia, who was born at Olympia on their last visit to this country, the Christmas before last. "A fine baby," said Maung Suri smilingly. He had just come from the nursing home. The baby is to be called Bella Houston. The father and mother hail from a jungle village in the Shan States, which lie between Tibet and Siam. They left Rangoon for this country on March 2 of this year to appear at the Exhibition. At the conclusion of the Exhibition they will return to their jungle home. Their only previous visit to this country was for the show at Olympia two years ago.

Image © National World Publishing Ltd

## Meet the Giraffe-Neck Women

A true saying it is that one half the world doesn't know how the other half lives. So I could not help thinking on Monday when I met the Giraffe Neck women. These strange and fascinating ladies of the jungle have their necks encased in half-a-hundredweight of brass—all because of an old village custom. The custom, it appears, came into existence centuries ago and has never been allowed to drop. It all started through the women of the Pedaung—a number of villages in the Southern Shan States—being too darned good-looking! The men from Tibet and Siam used to come so frequently and carry them off that somehow or other a stop had to be put to the practice. Thus a meeting of the headmen of the Pedaung was called and ways and means were discussed. Long into the night the deliberations continued, until at last someone got an inspiration—if the ladies had rings of bright, glistening brass round their necks they'd be easily seen; the raiders wouldn't dare carry away maidens whose identity was so clearly noted. The suggestion was at once adopted, and with great rejoicing and all due ceremony the ladies were subsequently adorned with a brass neck-ring each. The rest of the story you can guess. One ring led to another, and after a few generations it became the fashion to see who could carry the greatest number. Naturally, to wear a lot of rings, it was necessary to have a long neck. Time passed, and the necks of these quaint people got longer and longer. I spoke to Maung Suri, the only man of the tribe accompanying the ladies, and asked him what he thought of this ringing business; was it not time the custom was allowed to fall into abeyance?

**The Men Don't Mind.** Apparently he hadn't thought about it. Maung Suri, village postmaster when at home, takes life as he finds it. Between jolly little chuckles, he told me in broken English that he liked beer! But as for entering into a controversy regarding the famous neck-rings, well, he wasn't interested. "The men don't mind," he said, laughing. I was going to point out that the men didn't have to wear the rings when he turned to find out when tea would be ready! The Giraffe Neck people, who are at present at Messrs. Barry's Amusements, North Street, and are reckoned as the strangest creatures ever to visit Ireland, are flinching about their food; they have with them a special cook, whose duty it is to prepare them special meat dishes. Otherwise they are not fussy. They are now quite accustomed to public scrutiny, and as a result behave very happily and naturally when on exhibit; they sit about in easy chairs, crack jokes at one another, and nurse the two babies. Yes, there are two baby members of the party, both born since arrival in Great Britain. Appropriately, they are called after their fairground birthplaces. One is Peter Olympia, a dark-skinned baby boy who has newly learned to toddle. Born at Olympia, he has as god-father Mr. Bertrand Mills, of circus fame. The other infant, who was sleeping snugly in her cot when I called, is Margaret Empress, born this year at the Glasgow Empire Exhibition. Maung Suri and his wife are rightly proud of their two bonny children. By the way, if you have the idea that the Giraffe Neck ladies feel sore about having to wear these rings—forget it. They have grown to like the custom, and, of course, to look upon it as "the right thing to do"; as babies they clamour to their mothers for rings on their necks. As a rule, however, they are not privileged to wear their first one until nearly four years' old. When you go to see them you may find it interesting to reflect that they are something like 11,000 miles from home; their journey to these islands is in itself a romance. Special permission had to be obtained from two Governments ere they were allowed to leave their native surroundings, though the last word on the matter rested with their own village chief. Those who wished the world to see the Giraffe Neck people, indeed, found him a much bigger handful than the two Governments' together. For three days continuous palaver in his hut was required before finally he gave his consent, in exchange for a gold watch. The only luggage the ladies brought away with them was a cask of coco-nut oil for their hair. They have very lovely, sleek, black hair, which they dress in a style all of their own. Since arrival in Britain they have learned many European ways. Bright and intelligent, they take a delight in following the customs of the European ladies. An endless source of wonder to them is the beautiful variety of shoes worn by the women here. Until eight months ago, you see, they had never known about shoes. Now, they simply can't go past a shoe shop without gazing in at the window. Their homes in the jungle consist of small thatched huts, and their sleeping quarters are always raised at least ten feet from the ground, prowling black panthers make this a necessity. A picturesque sight were these strange little people as they trooped off together for tea—or their equivalent. Rich in contrast, I thought, were the ladies with their long giraffe necks covered with the famous brass rings and their cheerful, happy-go-lucky escort, Maung Suri, resplendent in baggy flannels, sports coat and Paddy hat. He also had his neck encased spectacularly—in a gaudy but comfortable-looking tartan scarf! (C.W.)



"MY SON WISHES TO BECOME A CHAUFFEUR." "WELL, PERSONALLY, I WOULDN'T STAND IN HIS WAY."

Ireland's Saturday Night - Saturday 05 November 1938 Image © Independent News and Media PLC. Image created courtesy of THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD.

I never ever thought until now about the colonial nature of it all. So I thought 'oh we should rebuild it' but now I've found out more I feel kind of ashamed about it. Research participant. 2025.

We can't NOT tell these histories - so what do we do? Research participant. 2025.

Although the Empire Exhibition perhaps had things about it that we don't much like today, I think we should have some faith that young people will take what they need, and make something of it. It won't necessarily be what the people who put the Exhibition on intended. But they'll take something out of it that's useful to them. And at the end of the day, the world that young people live in is so very, very different from that of their parents. Story by Shona MacIver about her uncle's visit to the Empire Exhibition as a boy.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.peacejusticestudies.org/chronicle/do-not-colonize-decolonization/>

<sup>4</sup> Fanon, Frantz, 1961, "The Wretched of the Earth"