

'The Joke of Wellington': The Duke of Wellington's cone from folk act to brand

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They called him the Iron Duke. His armies defeated Napoleon and saved Europe from tyranny. So how did Glasgow reward the Duke of Wellington? They put a traffic bollard on his statue's head. (Leask 2005)

In the city centre of Glasgow stands Royal Exchange Square and within it the Gallery of Modern Art (known as the GoMA). The gallery is housed in a 1778 'Tobacco Lords' mansion house (Bowers 2005: 11) and, since 1844, in front stands an equestrian statue of the Duke of Wellington by Carlo Marochetti (Nisbet). It is only one of Glasgow's many impressive statues but Marochetti's Wellington has achieved a greater fame as being the statue with the traffic cone hat, now being Glasgow's most recognisable landmark (see Image 1). After a long period of official condemnation of the practice, the coned statue and the act of coning has become an accepted part of Glasgow life, with the Duke and cone featuring prominently in information about the city and in art works, humour, and in advertising and branding.

In this article I will focus on the history of the Duke's cone, and how the attitude of the city (both the people and the city authorities) has developed until the practice has become an informal emblem for Glasgow. In an attempt to avoid an article of



1: Looking north from Queen Street at Duke of Wellington with cone (and seagull) and the front entrance of Gallery of Modern Art, Royal Exchange Square, Glasgow (photographed 12 September 2022)

collectanea, I shall further consider the cone in the wider context of similar public interactions.

HISTORY OF THE CONE

Some attribute the custom of placing the cone on Wellington's head to the 1980s (Leask 2005; BBC 2005) but I spoke with one informant who

said they had spoken to people claiming to have clambered up in the 1970s. Certainly the practice has been in existence since the late 1990s, as I cannot remember a time in my adult life when cones were not, at least infrequently, placed on the statue.

Public and official condemnation of the custom can be traced at least to 2000 when Greater Glasgow & Clyde Valley Tourist Board were said to have removed 'the cone off the statue because we felt it would clutter up the shots' being taken for promotional material (Daily Record 2000). This led to a battle of soundbites between local politicians. Alex Mosson, the then-Lord Provost of Glasgow, said:

The statue of Wellington has become famous for the cone on its head. The image typifies the unique mixture of culture and humour Glasgow has to offer. After all, the humour of the Glasgow people is the city's greatest selling point (*Ibid.*)¹

A previous Lord Provost, Pat Lally, however agreed with the Tourist Board's actions, saying: 'Glaswegians are sick of the sight of cones... I'm not sure that it does a lot for the people of Glasgow' (BBC 2000(b)).

The official line remained anti-coning for the next few years and an early satirical response replicated this. An unconed Duke featured in the 2001 Hogmanay Special of the Scottish sketch comedy show, *Chewin the Fat*, with two of the characters – the Banter Boys – about to apply a traffic cone before being chased off by a policeman who threatens them with 'spending... Ne'er Day in a tiny cell' if they climbed the statue (Chewin

the Fat). In early 2005 the local authority, Glasgow City Council, 'issued a reminder that the placing of the cone constitutes... an act of vandalism' and were said 'to be taking a tougher stance on the unsanctioned decoration'. The reason given was 'not only because of the damage that could be caused to the statue itself, but of the harm that could come to someone if they fell off'. At the same time, the local police gave a weak warning that anyone caught climbing on the statue (whether in the act of coning or, presumably, otherwise) 'could face prosecution' but that 'each individual incident would have to be treated on its own merits'. It was said that the statue had already lost spurs and half of the sword 'as a result of pranksters trying to scale the structure' (BBC 2005). Charles Gordon, the then-council leader, said: '[P]erhaps the joke has worn a bit thin. It is a minor act of vandalism... I don't think anyone, drunk or sober, should be encouraged to climb up on the statue. It's dangerous' (Stewart 2005). This tougher policy apparently lasted less than a year as by December 2005 a new City Council leader, the 'youthful' Steven Purcell, was said to 'still see... the funny side of the prank' and the cone was by then 'on many postcards, T-shirts and travel guide covers, and ha[d] even featured in an *Evening Times* [newspaper] advertising campaign' (Leask 2005).

As Glasgow entered the dying days of the Cool Britannia period, there always seemed to be a cone on the Duke's head, though Glasgow City Council had not yet surrendered in the battle of the cone, utilising the strategy of 'a high powered water jet... used to wash the cones off the statue'

on many mornings (at least according to one blogger: Matthews 2007). The cone was already serving as a tourist attraction and local comment would bemoan any occasion that the cone was missing. The Glasgow comedian Limmy, in one of his early short films in 2007, pretended to be a visiting east coaster and filmed the (unconed) statue while complaining he had come all the way to Glasgow to see the cone but 'there's nae bloody cone on the heid, aeh... Just pretty gutted, eh' (*Cone*). By 2008, Lonely Planet listed Glasgow as one of the top 100 cities to see in the world, with the statue mentioned as a site to visit (Nicoll 2008), and in 2011 they upgraded the Duke to one of the top 1000 sites to see in the world, as part of a top 100 of 'the world's strangest tourist destinations' (Evening Times 2011).

September 2011 saw a significant adoption of the tradition by officialdom with a mobile phone 'app' called *Glasgow Cone Challenge* issued by the Glasgow City Marketing Bureau as part of its 'Glasgow with Style' campaign. The now-defunct game required users to flick cones onto the statue's head (Swain 2011). Promoted with the tag line: 'Don't put a real cone on the Duke's head, play the game instead!', the Bureau asserted that coning was 'a reflection of the city's irreverent sense of humour and its ability not to take authority too seriously' (Glasgow City Marketing Bureau 2011).

During this time, little comment was received from heritage organisations or commentators. An early Jeremiah was art historian Gary Nisbet who decried the 'vandalism' and the 'hypocrisy' of the public adoption of the image. He appears to be the

first to popularise (if not coin) the term 'the Joke of Wellington' (Nisbet; Leask 2005) and argued that, even though 'Wellington was a bampot' this 'is an important, valuable, and beautiful statue which needs to be protected' (Herald 2005). The only other notable criticism from the art world was later added by Sandy Stoddart, then the Queen's sculptor in Scotland, who referred to the coning as 'the abuse of which Glasgow has taken to its heart like a class delinquent' (Stoddart 2012), that it was 'detestable', and the 'single most embarrassing thing about the culture of Glasgow' (Braiden 2013).

Official opposition to the practice thus remained in the early 2010s, despite the Council logging a meagre number of complaints each year². The final official assault on the Field Marshall's bonnet came in 2013 when a plan was released by the Council proposing £65,000 of refurbishment works to the square, of which one part was raising the plinth to 1.8 meters high so as to deter all but the most dedicated climbers. The business case for the proposal stated:

For more than 30 years the Wellington monument has been defaced by traffic cones, which regularly appear on the head of the horse or rider (and sometimes both) after the revelries of the weekend.

This depressing image of Glasgow has sadly featured in posters and postcards depicting the city.

Ironically, this unfortunate impression of the city has been supported by former Lord Provosts and chief executive and even adopted occasionally by the city marketing bureau.

The report claimed that 'the cost of removing these cones is conservatively put at £100 a time and the frequency is estimated at around 100 times a year'³. The report cited direct damage to the statue of 'paint... peeling, causing corrosion to the ironwork and hastening water damage' (all quotes from BBC 2013(c)).

The Council's proposal encountered a significant backlash, with the Council 'condemned' on social media and the target of Facebook campaigns, a petition, and many a punning quote (such as entreating the Council to 'Cony no dae that' to a practice which was 'i-cone-ic') (Haggerty 2013; BBC 2013(c)). The Council climbed down within days and an official spokesman for the politicians implied it was all the fault of unnamed bureaucrats: 'The wording of the report was appalling, and the [council leader] has instructed officers to withdraw the planning application' (BBC 2013(b)). A different part of the Council stood strong with a further spokesperson saying: 'Although many people like to see the cone, it is a risk. We will continue to remove it' (Gray 2013).

The forces massed against the Duke's cone finally met their Waterloo in Summer 2014 as a replica of the Duke with a glowing cone stood proudly as a centre-piece in Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony (ABC 2014). The centrality of His Grace's headgear to official branding for the city took off from there including: being an emblem for the city on the public hire bikes; a cartoon version of him (using his cone as a megaphone) being named the 'COP26 Head of Travel' in posters

and videos about travel restrictions during the city's 2021 hosting of the huge international environmental conference (*COP26 Travel 2021*); and a 2024 adaptation of Visit Glasgow's *People Make Glasgow* campaign featuring a traffic cone hanging off the slogan: 'YOU MAKE GLASGOW The friendliest city in the world' (Visit Scotland 2024).

Recent criticism has not been of the cone, but the presence of the Duke himself. In 2021, Zandra Yeaman, communities and campaigns officer for the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights proposed that the Duke should be moved to a sculpture park, with other undesirable sculpture, as a project to develop a 'Museum of Slavery, Empire and Migration', saying: 'The Wellington Statue is an iconic image in Glasgow with the cone on its head that people are so proud of' but 'the friezes around the statue are images of him slaughtering South Asians, sacking Indian cities and it sits outside a slaver's house built off the back of enslaved African people'. SNP Councillor Graham Campbell was quoted in favour of leaving the Duke in place, as a symbol of anti-establishment protests: 'I think people have already shown how much respect they have for the Duke of Wellington by placing a cone on his head' (Brown 2020).

THE CONE IN ART, POPULAR CULTURE, COMMERCE AND FOLKLORE

Once firmly affixed as part of Glasgow's image and folk life for locals and visitors alike, the Duke and his cone have become a popular image on postcards and art works by many local artists, and dominate creative interaction with the city.



2: Mural 'Are Ye Dancin?' by Conzo and Globel (photographed 18 September 2022)



3: Entrance sign at Ibis Styles hotel, Mitchell Street, Glasgow (photographed 21 September 2019)



4: Mural at Mexican restaurant 'El Jefe's' at Fenwick Road/ Station Road, Giffnock, Glasgow (photographed 6 April 2023)



5: Advertising for Equi's ice cream in fish and chip shop, Fenwick Road, Giffnock, Glasgow (photographed 17 August 2024)

He has been a watercolour on *Scottish Field's* 'The Glasgow Issue', peaked out of the corner of adverts for a National Theatre of Scotland performance, and had an Oor Wullie with cone temporarily installed next to him as part of a fundraising campaign by the Glasgow Children's Hospital Charity. The Duke adorns the front of hotels and murals, and he and his cone feature in adverts from banks to dairies. The Duke or just his cone are represented in multiple items for sale from replica statues to chocolate bars and shortbread boxes. You can purchase a custom Lego Duke with cone, Christmas tree baubles, or – within the foyer of GoMA – you can squash a penny and have the Duke and hat stamped onto your defaced coin. An early commercialisation was by a local lawyer, Philip Hannay, who copyrighted and trademarked 'The Glasgow Hat', being a traffic cone hat for sale in local gift shops (Rennie 2007)⁴.

The image of an out-of-place traffic cone is so easily recognised, and strongly associated with the city, that its use has extended beyond mere reproductions and adaptations. A traffic cone alone, or simply a cone-shaped or orange-coloured object atop something, features regularly in advertising and art such as: a traffic cone hanging off a Charles Rennie Mackintosh chair in window decals from a local bus company; or the Duke wearing an orange sombrero in a mural outside a suburban Mexican restaurant. The most abstract is a local ice-cream manufacture's advertising which shows the head of Michelangelo's David wearing an inverted ice-cream cone. (Tables set out non-exhaustive lists of uses collected of the statute or

a cone in: artistic creations and humour (Table 1); items available for sale (Table 2); and marketing and branding (Table 3) along with references and dates of my first collection. Also see Images 2 to 5 referred to therein.)

The same creative development applies to the cone itself. Once a matter of replacing one generic traffic cone by another (and perhaps adding an extra cone onto the head of the horse) now the cone is frequently decorated by local artists or by those seeking publicity for their product or cause. A gold cone was added to 'celebrate Scotland's success in Team GB' (Daily Record 2012) at the time that Royal Mail had been painting a postbox gold in the home town of each of Team GB's 2012 Olympic gold medalists (for instance, BBC 2012(a); BBC 2012 (b)). Within the last years there have been: European stars on a cone to mark Brexit; Santa bringing a Christmas tree cone; and a knitted cover in the colours of Ukraine's flag (see Image 6). The extension of corporate marketing directly onto the cone also commenced during this time, with cones marked with logos or flyers advertising an event or product (marked by a predictable social media outrage about a perceived commercialisation: Carmichael 2024). (Table 4 sets out a non-exhaustive list of collected non-standard cones and dressings, with references and dates.)

The cone has reached the stage of metaphor, standing for permanence or resilience in the midst of change or upheaval, such as in *The Guardian's* report of the 2012 local government elections:

In days gone by there were some certainties about Glasgow life. The Duke of Wellington

statue always had a traffic cone on its head, Rangers Football Club was comfortably solvent, and Labour ran the magnificent 19th-century city chambers on George Square. (Crawford 2012).

and in this 2014 article on the city's response to a tragic crash days earlier:

Glaswegians as a proud bunch. The things we value might not be the civic totems of other cities but we will defend our statue of the Duke of Wellington with the traffic cone on his head... until the bitter end. And when something grisly happens, like a bin lorry careening through a crowded, pre-Christmas shopping area, we have a strong sense of community to pull us through. (Burnside 2014)

Such is the quotidian certainty of the Duke's cone, *The Herald's* diary writer noted social media worry in 2022 when the Duke was briefly seen without his cone: 'As you can imagine, the locals are not taking this desecration of a famous landmark lightly, and on social media a doom-laden prophesy is gloomily referenced: "If the Duke is unconed, no more tattie scones"' (Jackson 2022; see also Craig 2010 for an earlier similar comment by a local blogger). The cone has thus been portrayed as the Glaswegian equivalent of the Tower of London's ravens (Historic Royal Palaces) but this is not the only folklore (or fakelore) about the cone or its origins.⁵

A 2020 article detailed a 'bizarre conspiracy theory' that the Bristolian street-artist Banksy was the first coner, on the basis that some early Glasgow work appeared in the late 1990s and floating the possibility that Banksy was a resident or frequent visitor in the city in the



6: Ukraine flag decorated cone (photographed 8 March 2022)

1990s (Williams 2020(b)). (Banksy himself has placed the origins of the practice much earlier describing – in the introduction to his catalogue for his 2023 solo show at the GoMA – the statue as a 'masterpiece' that 'has had a cone on its head continuously for the past 40 odd years' (Banksy 2023: frontispiece).) A further legend for the origin of the cone is a debunking one: 'that famous image of the drunk clambering astride the horse to "crown" the Duke is merely a myth' (Yelp 2009) as it is always coned by the local authority itself. As one 2011 poster recounts:

One morning, when I was having a coffee and a smoke at Costa in the square, looking at the statue, I saw a council works van with a crane on it pull up, blocking half the traffic down Queen Street. A pair of council workers in hi-vis jackets got up in the crane next to the (at that point unconed) duke, plonked a fresh traffic cone atop his head, took a promotional photo of it for the council to demonstrate what a fun and happening place Glasgow was, then yanked it off, got in the van and left, leaving a rather amused-looking crowd. (Montag 2011)

A migratory legend applied to the statue (migratory both in location and artwork) is a version of a 'suicidal artist' legend that has the statue's sculptor, Marochetti, committing suicide 'when he noticed that he had forgotten to include the spurs on his equestrian statue of the Duke of Wellington', which spurs are more commonly reported as having been 'broken off in a later act of vandalism' (Westwood and Kingshill 2009: 156-157).

INTERACTION WITH STATUARY

Other examples from Glasgow and Edinburgh

Interacting with, or placing items onto, city statues is not unique to Glasgow, and Wellington is not unique in Glasgow city centre. There is a former practice of trying to throw stones into the outstretched hat held by the statue of James Oswald MP in George Square (see Image 7). In 1898, Para Handy author Neil Munro is said to have accompanied a visiting Joseph Conrad around Glasgow and told him that, if he successfully had his 'chuckie' go into the hat, he would become an 'honorary Glaswegian'. Conrad



7: Statue of James Oswald MP, George Square, Glasgow, wearing a cone (photographed 16 January 2024)

is said to have persisted until he achieved this (Lendrum 2004: 85).

More recently, after the late Labour politician, Donald Dewar – the 'father' of the modern Scottish Parliament – was honoured in 2002 with a statue at the top of Buchanan Street in Glasgow, this likeness was quickly subjected to people climbing up and decorating it. Early on a cone was reported as having been placed on his head (Brown 2002) but further types of dressing were noted, such as 'a single red rose on the plinth' with a brief romantic note (*Ibid.*) as well as 'a packet of

Polo Mints... placed in his hands, clasped behind his back' but thereafter '[g]raffiti, including gang slogans,... started to appear on the torso, ... [t]he most recent, and prominent, is of the CND symbol on each jacket lapel and "no war" on the tie'. A commentator regarded this later development as inappropriate, saying the polo mints 'was a funny, slightly irreverent, yet well-meaning gesture in keeping with the humour of the citizens of Mr Dewar's native city' but that the other items 'demean[ed] Mr Dewar's reputation and that of his city' (Herald 2003). The official response was to place Dewar's statue on a higher, smoother pedestal but his prominent perch at the top of a major shopping street, near a rallying point for protesters and speakers, means the statue is still occasionally coned (as are many other statues in the city) but Mr Dewar also receives more overt political decoration such as the chimpanzee mask and a sign reading 'No More Monkey Business' shown in Image 8. No grand theory can be devised as to which Glaswegian statues are coned (or otherwise interacted with) or why, but cones and other items rarely remain for any duration on any other statue, and no statue has a constant succession of the same item like the cones on the Duke of Wellington.

Since the 2010s, cones have appeared with some frequency in Edinburgh, with reports of them on: the Duke of Wellington statue in front of Register House on Princes Street (Gemmill 2013), a golf ball statue in Musselburgh (East Lothian News 2014), and David Hume on the Royal Mile (Pooran 2019; Williamson 2021). David Hume is also the subject of a different



8: Statue of Donald Dewar MP, dressed as part of environmental protest, Buchanan Street, Glasgow (photographed 15 June 2022)

form of interaction, with members of the public reaching up to rub his outstretched right toe. It was said to 'have started as a local tradition by philosophy students' but was now more generally adopted by those 'believing [it]... will bring luck or knowledge' (McMahon 2022). Within 350 metres of Hume's toe, the rubbing of the nose of the statue of Greyfriars Bobby on George IV Bridge caused controversy after a 2013 'nose job' failed within two days (BBC 2013(a)). Again, 'luck' was cited as the reason for the practice of rubbing, with tourists rather than students regarded as the culprits. In this case, the local authority announced that it had no further plans to restore the small statue and simply asked

people to forego rubbing, but said that if they felt 'obliged to rub Bobby's nose [the Council]... encourage[d] them to do it gently' (BBC 2014).

STATUARY INTERACTION ELSEWHERE

Due to limitations of space, a complete listing of all recent forms of interaction with statuary in other towns and cities across the world is not possible⁶ but three examples represent traditions of deposition of objects, themed decoration, and unintentional damage which aspects can all be seen with the Duke of Wellington.

Remaining in the UK, Antony Gormley's commanding 20-metre-tall 'Angel of the North' in Gateshead has both been hatted and shirted. A team of abseilers donned it with a Santa hat (then removed days later by one dressed as the Grinch) in 2018 (ITV 2018(b)), and within its first year of being erected – 1998 - it was dressed with a giant Newcastle United shirt using 'fishing line, rubber balls and catapults' (BBC 1998) in an act that the sculptor himself described as 'extraordinary' and a sign to him that 'now the Angel is being accepted' by the local population (ITV 2018(a)).

More personal interaction occurs on and around the Angel. At the base of the statue is much graffiti, which can only be seen up close. It is predominantly tagging of names and initials, some appearing romantic and some marking visits. Separately, at the side of the statue's base, in a 'scrubby copse of alder trees... is a spontaneous, secret garden of memories' where the public has placed 'photographs, folder and unfolded notes, straggles of ribbon, baubles, garlands, plastic butterflies' and other items, all now in various stag-

es of becoming 'weather-ravaged' (Brown 2023). The theme of angels is understandably dominant. The statue's interpretation boards refer to part of the artist's vision as an angel watching over while miners toiled beneath the surface, and it is easy to understand the emotional attraction of feeling that the Angel of the North is overlooking the memorials to loved ones.⁷ Gateshead Council, who manage the area, adopt a pragmatic approach. In regard to the graffiti, there is 'very limited' attempt to remove the graffiti as '[i]t is very difficult to remove unless caught before it has been absorbed and dried' into the steel, but they seek to remove it quickly if the graffiti is 'offensive'. Regarding the memorial garden, the Council confirmed that it 'is completely unofficial and has been on going for many years' but given 'the sensitivity of this area [the Council has]... thus far has been reluctant to remove' it (personal correspondence, 8 August 2022).

In regard to themed dressing up of statues, an obvious analogue is Brussels' Manneken-Pis. He is dressed for around half the year, with the costume changes undertaken by an organisation who schedule it all in advance (City of Brussels). The outfits may celebrate an occasion – religious or secular – and often have a political message such as World AIDS Day or Pride month, or dressed in a Union Jack waistcoat ahead of Brexit (so a mirror of the Duke's European flag cone). There is an official process for offering costumes to the organisation for acceptance, and a museum of costumes previously worn. Despite the highly organised system for the statue's dressing, it is still seen as representative of a specifically Bruxelloise

semi-sarcastic sense of humour which is called *zwanze* (CNRTL). (There is a parallel with many seeing the Duke's cone as representing a Glaswegian sense of humour and mockery of the powerful.)

Finally, as a further example of an invented tradition resulting in public interaction to the point of damage, in Verona, Italy, a practice developed of rubbing the right breast of a 1970s statue of Shakespeare's Juliet which was 'meant to bring good fortune for those who are unlucky in love, but... ha[d] left it looking decidedly the worse for wear', resulting in a replica being installed in 2014 at a cost of €20,000. The local authorities had further sought since 2012 to levy 'heavy fines' on 'tourists who were leaving sentimental notes stuck to the brick walls of the courtyard [where the statue sits], often using wads of chewing gum' (Squires 2014).

POLITICAL INTERACTION

The destruction and defacing of images for religious or political purposes has ancient antecedents, and literal iconoclasm continues to date, such as the 2020 the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol during a Black Lives Matter protest (for which four protesters were charged with criminal damage, but then acquitted by the jury: see BBC 2022(b)).

Less destructive political actions have included: the grass Mohawk given to Winston Churchill during London's 2000 'May Day Riots' (BBC 2000(a)); red paint thrown over a statue of Churchill in Edmonton, Canada in 2021 in connection with the treatment of First Nations

children in residential schools (CBC 2022); and two women convicted of malicious mischief after smearing jam and porridge over a bust of Queen Victoria in Glasgow's Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in a 2024 protest about food insecurity (BBC 2024).

VANDALISM AS A TRADITION

Defacement of a space or property can become a traditional or folkloric act. Folklorist Ian Brodie has studied the Sydney River Trestle Bridge, in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia that, for around 40 years, it has been graffitied and counter-graffitied as part of a rivalry between two high schools and as a rite of passage on graduation. Those carrying out the painting see themselves as undertaking a traditional practice and, in response to attempts to halt the practice, a number of 2010 designs specifically referred to such, including 'THIS Tradition NEVER ENDS' painted on the bridge's southwest retaining wall (Brodie 2017).

An entirely different form of damage – to a farmer's crop undertaken by crop circle creators – has been considered as a 'new folk tradition of temporal "art events"' (Roberts 1999: 81). Although splits in perception of the Duke's cone or the Sydney River Trestle Bridge can be seen between it being a 'tradition' or 'vandalism', with crop circles the split in perception is more broad. Those who recognise the marks in the field as the work of crop circle makers see an artistic creation, but some dispute the authorship of the creators and see the work as having a supernatural origin and significance (Roberts 1999: 97).

CONCLUSIONS

It is tempting to see the folk act of depositing of a traffic cone – being a mundane everyday object of the modern age – as a secularised development from dressing of wells or of religious statuary. If so, it sits in parallel with such dressing and deposition of votive objects which remains present in modern life (such as 'cloutie' (rags) wells and trees (Westwood and Kingshill 2009: 44)⁸). The development of the memorial garden next to the 'Angel of the North', and many similar roadside memorials, shows that any location where a person finds a meaning can lead to a site of deposition of objects.

The deposition of the cone can create its own meaning. Two informants from my research⁹ admitted to having re-coned the Duke during their student days (in the 1990s) if they found him bare-headed. Both referred to a desire to maintain the tradition that the Duke should wear a cone¹⁰. Thus a sense of tradition may give meaning to our impulse to do stupid things when drunk or excited (such as climbing a statue or graffitiing a bridge).

The cone's political meaning can be over-stated. The statue itself, erected after an underwhelming request for public subscription, was overtly political. It has been described as part of a 'Tory project' of 'Unionist Nationalism' (Cookson 2004: 23–27) but such specific political intentions now seem lost to those interacting with the Duke, as the act of coning does not appear to have any particular political bias. Art critic Tom Denman draws a direct connection between public monuments and political dissent, stating '[f]or every monument

these is a riot waiting to happen. Implicit in every monument is the blood that isn't seen' resulting in a constant tension that invites 'righteous riotousness' to spill forth (Denman 2023: 10). Thus to Denman the Duke is not unique, as all statues invite 'riotous' political interaction.

Denman's view of Wellington's cone is, however, that it has become a 'humorous manifestation of the permanent riot' but has been co-opted and the 'riot is now a ghost of itself... absorbed into the ideologies of commerce and power promoted by the very monument that the cone originally poked fun at' (ibid.: 11). Such a view merges into the general consensus that the Duke's cone simply illustrates 'the city's irreverent sense of humour and its ability not to take authority too seriously' (Glasgow City Marketing Bureau 2011). Such a representation of a city's humour is also not unique, as we see with the Bruxelloise explanation of *zwanze* for the Mannekin-Pis. Further, like the Mannekin-Pis' formal committee and rules for dressing, the cone has only flourished with the involvement of the local authorities who, through not pressing for prosecution of those who undertake it and tolerating a degree of damage, acknowledge that the public's attitude to the act has a greater significance.

With no unique quality found in the act of applying mundane objects to a statue, political interaction with a public statue, or in the interpretation that such acts show a city's humour and irreverence, what accounts for the dominant position of the Duke of Wellington's cone? It may be an ease of recognition combined with Glasgow's lack of something better. Despite its grand archi-

texture and history, the city has no single building or structure that is instantly recognisable as Glasgow. Further, there is no single institution that represents and binds all Glaswegians. Indeed, the city is divided by certain institutions, such as its football teams. The Duke of Wellington's cone provides a unifying image that is not subject to copyright, and is easily emulated and portrayed¹¹. It is both related to the city's grandeur but also represents its people's interaction with that grandeur. As an outlet for political statement it is malleable, accessible and tolerated. Finally, there never seems to be a shortage of available cones on Glasgow's roads.

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Table 1: Uses of the statute or a cone in artistic creations and humour

Description	Creator	Source	First seen or reported
Watercolour cover of Scottish Field's 'The Glasgow Issue' showing statue with cone, from rear	Scottish Field (magazine)	(Scottish Field 2018)	August 2018
Social media (April Fool's) post of Dippy the Dinosaur with a traffic cone on his head	Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery	(Evening Times 2011)	1 April 2019
Oor Wullie statue with cone hat in Royal Exchange Square ('Oor Wee Yin's Banter')	Rachael Tidmore (artist) for Glasgow Children's Hospital Charity 'Oor Wullie's Bucket Trail'	Viewed in person	8 July 2019
Child's Halloween party costume for primary school of her as Duke on horse, wearing road cone	Child's parent	Viewed viral Facebook post	22 October 2019
Lego recreation of Duke with cone	Stephen O'Neil (artist)	Viewed on website shop	26 October 2019
Carved pumpkin of Duke with cone at Glasgow event, as part of installation of carved pumpkins	Event's creators	Viewed in person	28 October 2019
Panda in kilt, wearing traffic cone on market stall selling bamboo brushes	Stall holder?	Viewed in person (Royal Exchange Square, adjacent to statue)	1 December 2019
Darth Vader, riding an AT-AT, both with traffic cones on head	Unknown	Viewed viral Facebook post	23 February 2020
Meme of 'A rare painting of the duke of Wellington in battle' (Adaption of Robert Alexander Hillingford's 'Wellington at Waterloo' (1815) with traffic cone superimposed on Wellington's head)	Unknown	Viewed viral Facebook post	1 October 2020

<p>Meme that a 'mysterious monolith has now appeared in George Square' (metal monolith, as had then-recently been found in USA, with traffic cone on top)</p>	<p>Scottish Banter (Facebook page)</p>	<p>Viewed viral Facebook post</p>	<p>3 December 2020</p>
<p>Meme of Princes William and Harry at statue of Princess Diane, superimposed with William holding a cone and saying to Harry: 'C'mon! They do it in Glasgow all the time'</p>	<p>Unknown</p>	<p>Viewed viral Facebook post</p>	<p>3 July 2021</p>
<p>MS Paint painting of Cher riding with Duke with cone along shopping street, as part of a series called 'No context advent calendar'</p>	<p>Jim'll Paint It (artist)</p>	<p>Viewed Facebook post</p>	<p>12 December 2021</p>
<p>Mural of upper half of Duke with cone, hugging a Tunnock's Tea Cake, with wording 'Are Ye Dancin?'</p>	<p>Conzo and Globel (artists)</p>	<p>Viewed in person (lane to rear of Argyll Arcade, leading to Sloans Bar). See Image 2.</p>	<p>18 September 2022</p>
<p>Meme with picture of King Charles' coronation and words: 'If the coronation was in Glasgow'. The King has a giant traffic cone placed on his head instead of a crown.</p>	<p>Tweet by @gavmacn</p>	<p>Viewed as viral social media post (in week following coronation)</p>	<p>9 May 2023</p>
<p>Street art of stick figure wearing kilt, with traffic cone on head and wording: 'Anyone seen my horse'.</p>	<p>The Fart of Wanksy' (part of counter-graffiti seen in city during the Banksy exhibition at GoMA)</p>	<p>Viewed in person (Miller Street)</p>	<p>23 June 2023</p>
<p>Silver plaque, placed opposite Duke, with humorous explanation of the 'Ancient Tradition Behind The Cones on Glasgow's Statues' including claims of hundreds of years of history including using haggis skins to compete for a chieftain's daughter's hand in marriage (which are later replaced by traffic cones). Part of a series of plaques allegedly placed throughout city as part of a 'Glaikit Guide to Glasgow'</p>	<p>Glaikit.scot</p>	<p>Viewed in person</p>	<p>8 October 2024</p>

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Christmas tree topped with a traffic cone photographed from outside tenement flat (Great Western Road)	Non-public post by Facebook friend	Viewed as Facebook post	7 December 2024
Mural with reproduction of 1930s Guinness advert featuring an ostrich that has swallowed a pint of Guinness, but with addition of traffic cone on head of ostrich	Unknown artist but adjacent to Malones Irish Bar	Viewed in person (Sauchiehall Lane)	21 December 2024
Sticker saying "Hello Your Name is Not the Duke of Wellington" with portrait of Wellington wearing a traffic cone bearing the Glasgow coat of arms	Artist signed as "nicollage_kg"	Viewed in person (stuck to object in George Square)	9 January 2025
Sticker of someone on Duke statue being handed up a traffic cone	Artist unknown	Viewed in person (stuck to gate on Hill Street)	29 March 2025

Table 2: Duke or cone items on sale

Description	Creator/ Supplier	Source	First seen or reported
'The Glasgow Hat' (traffic cone shaped hat)	Philip Hannay	(Rennie 2007)	2007
Multiple prints, paintings, coasters, magnets	Various	Seen in shops and markets	Collected from 2012 onwards
Hand-painted Christmas tree bauble 'decorated with images of the iconic Duke of Wellington "Glasgow Style"' (ie statue with cone on head)	The Olde Christmas Shoppe.co.uk	Viewed on website	12 December 2021
Clothing (various t-shirts, shirts, jackets and jumpers) featuring with small logo at breast of Duke with cone; also small plushie of 'Duke with his cone'	AlbanyClothing.co.uk (Duke with cone is also logo on website)	Viewed on website	3 June 2022
Gallery of Modern Art squashed penny with Duke with cone	Machine in foyer of GoMA	Viewed in person	2 July 2022
1) Chocolate bars with photograph of Duke with cone on wrapper 2) Small replica statue of Duke with cone called 'Coneheid Glasgow'	Souvenir/ sweet shop on Trongage	Viewed in person	25 March 2023
Traffic cone as part of Scottish-themed illustrations on box of 'Jock's Travels' shortbread	Deans Scottish All Butter Shortbread	Viewed in person in supermarket	4 September 2023
Whisky bottles with domed section in base containing miniature statue of Duke with cone (various sizes)	Scotch whisky shop on Gordon Street	Viewed in person in shop window	10 November 2023
Irn-Bru margarita offered for sale in local bar, named 'The Banksy', and advertised by drawing of the cocktail with a miniature traffic cone hanging off a straw	Max's Bar	Viewed in person in bar (Queen Street)	11 January 2024
Socks with traffic cone logo as part of 'Big City Glasgow' set. (Also sell traffic cone magnets and key chains)	Big City Collectables	Owned by spouse	21 January 2024
Prints featuring a traffic cone with a tiny Duke of Wellington on top	Jord.art	Viewed on sponsored Facebook post	13 July 2024

Table 3: Use of Duke or cone (or variation) in branding and marketing

Description	Advertiser/Event/ Location	Source	First seen or reported
Advertising poster including words: 'You Are Glasgow' and 'It may be pelting down roughly 170 days a year but between Macintoshes and Traffic Cone Hats, you're well covered'	HSBC (bank)	Viewed in person (as bus stop sign, Great Western Road)	19 January 2019
Decal on side of escalator of Duke with cone	Buchanan Galleries (shopping mall)	Viewed in person	22 August 2019
Advertising post with image of Duke with cone	Zoek.uk (job vacancies website)	Viewed in person (as sign in Kelvinbridge underground station)	12 September 2019
Mural of Duke with road cone embedded, as part of welcome sign at front of hotel	Ibis Styles (hotel)	Viewed in person (Mitchell Street). See Image 3.	21 September 2019
Duke with cone as part of window decals for souvenir shop	I ♥ Glasgow (shop)	Viewed in person (Sauchiehall Street)	5 October 2019
Duke with cone as window decal for souvenir shop, plus cone hanging off ♥ in shopfront signage	We ♥ Glasgow (shop)	Viewed in person (Queen Street)	5 October 2019
Line drawing of Duke and cone on rental bike decoration	Nextbike (rental bicycles)	Viewed in person (Queen Street)	7 December 2019
Stylised image of Celine Dion wearing traffic cone on head advertising Eurovision-themed club night	Ne Party Pas Sans Moi (event)	Viewed on sponsored Facebook post	10 January 2020
Sculpture of upturned traffic cone on its side, with illuminated ? in base, as centrepiece to shoe shop	size? (shop)	Viewed in person (Royal Exchange Square, adjacent to statue)	13 March 2020

Advertising post with photograph of Duke with cone including words: 'Glasgow: the only place in the world where a traffic cone on the head of a statue is totally normal and an important part of the city's identity'	University of Strathclyde	Viewed on viral Facebook post	17 October 2020
Advertising post by mobile phone company showing two Dukes with cones (one more filled in than the other) comparing advertiser's coverage to their competitors	EE	Viewed on sponsored Facebook post	29 June 2021
Information campaign (posters, social media posts, billboards, videos) for COP26 featuring the Duke as 'Head of Travel', wearing cone which he uses as a megaphone	COP26 organisers (international conference)	Viewed throughout city and online; (<i>COP26 Travel 2021</i>)	In advance of and during event (23 October to 14 November 2021)
Advertising poster featuring horse with cone peaking in from side and including words: 'Big on milk as Scottish as seeing a statue with a traffic cone on it'	Lidl (supermarket)	Viewed in person (as bus stop sign, Argyll Street)	18 September 2022
Colourful decal of Duke with cone on buses. Also same image on promotional material for tour buses.	CitySightseeing Glasgow (tourist bus company)	Viewed in person	21 September 2022
Billboard poster with milk bottle with traffic cone on top advertising delivery service	McQueens Dairies (dairy)	Viewed in person (Fenwick Road, Giffnock)	30 January 2023
Advertising post by comedy festival, with traffic cone hanging off top of festival logo (GICF)	Glasgow International Comedy Festival	Viewed on sponsored Facebook post	13 February 2023
Advertising banners including small outline of Duke's head with cone	Glasgow Film Festival	Viewed in person (Buchanan Street)	20 February 2023

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Advertising mural featuring Duke with cone reclining in cinema seat, with speech bubble: 'Switch aff your phone!'	Vue Cinemas	Viewed in person (outside entrance to cinema, St Enoch shopping mall)	4 March 2023
Mirror in charity shop with traffic cone painted on, encouraging customers to take a selfie of themselves and post it to social media with charity's hashtag	Shelter (housing charity)	Viewed in person (pop up shop, Glasgow Central train station)	11 March 2023
Mural of Duke wearing an orange sombrero, outside Mexican restaurant	El Jefe's (restaurant)	Viewed in person (Fenwick Road/ Station Road, Giffnock). See Image 4.	6 April 2023
Advertising post by social enterprise café featuring Duke with cone	Social Bite (café)	Viewed on sponsored Facebook post	3 May 2023
Billboard poster with man using a traffic cone as a megaphone, advertising 'Scotland's New Lottery!'	The Scotto (lottery company)	Viewed in person (Fenwick Road, Giffnock)	13 September 2023
HMV logo (Nipper the dog) wearing a traffic cone, part of in-store shop sign	HMV	Viewed in person (Argyll Street)	25 October 2023
Advertising post for website promoting skills training, featuring Duke with cone	TheSkillsNetwork.com	Viewed on sponsored Facebook post	5 January 2024
Sticker of a traffic cone with a saltire flag and cow bell (for cycling clothing brand)	Rapha (sports clothing and accessory brand)	Viewed in person (stuck on item in Cochrane Street)	16 January 2024
Duke and cone as logo of Facebook group promoting Glasgow's heritage	Project Glasgow (Facebook page)	Viewed on Facebook	18 January 2024

Traffic cone painted onto reproduction of Old Master painting as part of 'Art Gone Wild' trail in Pollok Country Park	National Trust for Scotland	Viewed in person	3 March 2024
Painted sign of Duke with cone, holding branded coffee cup, outside café	Gordon Street Coffee	Viewed in person (Glasgow Central Station)	25 March 2024
Advertising post for website promoting 'tech expo' featuring Duke with cone including wording: 'When in Glasgow, dae as the Glaswegian'	Digit Tech News & Events	Viewed on sponsored Facebook post	29 March 2024
Advertising campaign including traffic cone hanging off the slogan: 'YOU MAKE GLASGOW The friendliest city in the world'	Visit Scotland	Viewed in person (on advertising sign in underground train); (Visit Scotland 2024)	6 May 2024
Bus poster featuring Duke and cone on edge, advertising theatre show 'Dear Billy'	National Theatre for Scotland	Viewed in person (on bus seen on George Street)	21 May 2024
Large white horse with traffic cone placed on head, in home furnishing display at entrance to furniture showroom. Information sign refers to a Swedish tradition of carving horses.	Ikea	Viewed in person (Ikea, Paisley)	13 July 2024
Advertising poster for crypto and blockchain conference, featuring photograph of Duke with cone	Blockstart (event)	Viewed in person (poster stuck to bus shelter on Fenwick Road, Giffnock)	7 August 2024
Advertising decal in window of closed store. Glasgow spelled out in decorated letters. L is a Mackintosh ladder-back chair with a traffic cone hanging off top.	McGill's (bus company)	Viewed in person (window of former Watts Brothers on corner of Bath Street and Hope Street)	10 August 2024

'The Joke of Wellington': The Duke of Wellington's cone from folk act to brand

<p>Branding for local ice-cream manufacturer showing the head of Michelangelo's David wearing an ice-cream cone, with wording: 'Scottish craft with an Italian accent'</p>	<p>Equi's (ice-cream manufacturer)</p>	<p>Viewed in person (fish and chip shop, Fenwick Road, Giffnock). See Image 5. Subsequently seen at other retailers.</p>	<p>17 August 2024</p>
<p>Stylised line drawing of Duke, with traffic cone embedded into surface, as part of Glasgow-themed design in First Class waiting lounge</p>	<p>Avanti West Coast (train operator)</p>	<p>Viewed in person (Glasgow Central Station)</p>	<p>30 August 2024</p>
<p>Logo for grilled cheese and bread food purveyor, housed in a former police box. Logo is a police box, covered in melted cheese, surmounted by a traffic cone</p>	<p>Cheese Box (food purveyor)</p>	<p>Viewed in person (Wilson Street)</p>	<p>23 September 2024</p>
<p>Bar/ restaurant named 'The Iron Duke' with window decal of Duke with cone</p>	<p>The Iron Duke (bar/restaurant)</p>	<p>Viewed in person (Royal Exchange Square, in view of statue)</p>	<p>7 October 2024</p>
<p>Advertising poster for Latin music party, featuring a Latin American-style equestrian statue wearing a traffic cone, standing on a speaker stack</p>	<p>Latin Christmas (event)</p>	<p>Viewed in person (poster stuck to window of closed restaurant, Sauchiehall Street)</p>	<p>7 December 2024</p>
<p>Window decals featuring outline of Duke and cone for food retailer outlet in train station</p>	<p>Marks & Spencers</p>	<p>Viewed in person (Glasgow Queen Street station)</p>	<p>9 December 2024</p>

MSP's Christmas card using a winning design from a competition amongst primary school pupils. Features an outline of the Duke and horse, with Duke wearing a Santa hat	Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP	Viewed in Facebook post by MSP	24 December 2024
Logo of Italian restaurant showing a caricatured restaurateur holding two bottles of Italian wine and wearing a traffic cone on his head	Laz Italian (restaurant)	Viewed in person (Bath Street)	31 December 2024
Logo featuring Duke with traffic cone	The Bell (online newspaper)	Viewed on sponsored Facebook post	9 February 2025
Logo of a fox wearing a traffic cone on its head, on a sticker	Rogue Aura (men's hair and skin care products)	Viewed in person (stuck on traffic light control in Bath Street)	20 January 2025
Bar sign featuring Duke on a blue horse wearing a green cone (perhaps signifying Rangers and Celtic respectively)	Tennent's Bar (Tennent lager)	Viewed in person (Glasgow Airport)	29 January 2025
Logo of a traffic cone in front of a pixelated explosion background	Big City Festival (taking place in Kelvingrove Park in August 2025)	Viewed on sponsored Facebook post	11 February 2025
Advertisement for performance of a band on tour to Glasgow, wearing traffic cones on their heads	Gnome (band)	Viewed on sponsored Facebook post	28 February 2025
Traffic cones on price list and mini traffic cone on a rugby ball and other items in window display (advertising showings of Six Nations games)	Drouthy's (bar)	Viewed in person (Queen Street, in view of statue)	3 March 2025

Table 4: Non-standard or themed cones or dressing

Design	Source	First seen or reported
Heart of Midlothian FC soccer club draped around Duke's neck (at the time of the team having cup match in Glasgow)	(Smith 2006)	16 May 2006
Gold cone to celebrate Olympic results. Likely added by local radio DJs.	(Daily Record 2012)	10 August 2012
Blue cone with 'Yes' logo and holding flag pole with 'Yes' flag	(The Herald 2014(b))	27 August 2014
Rainbow cone (for Glasgow Pride)	(GlasgowLive 2017)	23 August 2017
Lewis Capaldi mask placed on statue	(The National 2019)	16 May 2019
Cone decorated in green and pink stripes, with cartoon face. Designed by unknown artist.	Viewed in person	17 October 2019
Cone decorated with EU flag (for Brexit Day)	(The National 2020)	31 January 2020
White illuminated balloons physically tied around statue, with branding 'Let there be light'. Attributed to advertising campaign by Tennents lager.	(Williams 2020(a))	7 February 2020
Black cone, with broad white strip featuring 'Black Lives Matter' logo	(Sabljak 2020)	7 June 2020
Decorated like a Christmas tree, including lights (placed up by coner dressed as Santa)	Viewed viral Facebook post; (Williams 2021)	21 December 2021
Crocheted yellow and blue cover for traffic cone (Ukraine flag), with yellow flowers out of top.	Viewed in person. See Image 6; (BBC 2022(a))	8 March 2022
'Mad dragon traffic cone' (green with pink dragon spiralling down). Designed by 'Kirsty'.	Viewed in person; (<i>This Artist Designed... 2023</i>)	19 September 2022
Black cone, topped by miniature Santa hat, with the words 'Voddy' vertically down cone in bright colours	Viewed in person	5 December 2023

Standard traffic cone with A4 posters stapled around it, advertising drama performance 'Looking for Laughs'	Viewed in person	12 August 2024
Cone wrapped with flyers for a music event.	(Carmichael 2024)	26 September 2024
Yellow cone with several round stickers affixed with logo: 'Voice for Dads' (podcast)	Viewed in person	25 November 2024

Endnotes

- 1 Mosson was later reported once to have refused to do a publicity shoot in front of GoMA unless a cone was put onto the statue's head (Stewart 2005).
- 2 'The local authority received seven complaints in 2010, two in 2011 and just one in each of 2012 and 2013. Complaints peaked in 2009, when 28 calls were taken.' (Herald 2014(a))
- 3 The cost is likely to come from staffing costs, and use of a cherry-picker to remove the cone (presumably to comply with a safe method of removal). For the alleged use of a cherry-picker in removals, see Gray 2013.
- 4 Mr Hannay's hats were then copied by cheaper knock-offs. After attempts to challenge the breaches of copyright, he eventually made the decision to stop trying to enforce his rights, rather than spend his time fighting all-comers (interview, Philip Hannay, 17 September 2022).
- 5 I recall a rumour around 25 years ago that the 'first student' to plant the cone had come forward to complain that he held copyright in the idea and wanted his share of the many uses of the image that were already prevalent. With no other reference to this rumour located, I am the sole 'informant' for this rumour.
- 6 In the UK these include: a road cone on Anteros's bow in Picadilly Circus, London (Sun 2021); painting of the toe and finger nails of the statues around the plinth of the Edward VII statue on Union Street, Aberdeen; items on the head of Edward III in Leeds City Square; the occasional dressing of the Captain Cook statue in Whitby; and the long standing student prank of trying to replace the sceptre of Henry VIII on Trinity College, Cambridge with a chair leg (BBC 2023).
- 7 Artistic and academic engagement in the memorial garden has come from Anne Whitehead, a professor at Newcastle University, who sought contact from families who had left memorials, and incorporated this into a work with a local sound artist, David de la Haye (Sounding The Angel 2024; Brown 2023).
- 8 Sophia Kingshill has also considered graffiti tagging as a modern 'folk practice', within a context that 'making your mark on your landscape is ancient practice' (Kingshill 2025).
- 9 Male, professional occupations, now 45-54, and university students in the mid-1990s and late 1990s respectively.
- 10 The 2001 *Chewin the Fat* sketch is near-contemporary to these two informants' recollections, and alludes to a similar sense of tradition, with the characters seeking to place the cone on the statue so as to be part of 'the banter' of Glasgow (Chewin the Fat).
- 11 It is more accurate to say that it is an image that is difficult to copyright. It would not engage intellectual property (IP) protections to take a photograph of the statue or paint it but the resultant artistic creation (the photograph or painting) could then be entitled to IP protection as a creative product. A commercial product involving the road cone (such as Mr Hannay's Glasgow Hat) could also potentially obtain IP protection, as could a business logo based on adding a traffic cone to an unusual product or which used an original drawing or rendering of the Duke and cone. In certain circumstances, traffic cone designs are also capable of IP protection and conceivably a cone manufacturer could take issue with an artistic reproduction of the Duke if it featured their distinctive cone design. (None appear yet to have done so.) I am obliged to Mr Hannay (the creator of the traffic-cone shaped 'Glasgow hat') for his comments on the copyrightability (or not) of the cone and its image (but any errors in expression are my own). Further legal analysis may be found at Iljadica (2017: 64-67), including a consideration of whether the original act of applying the cone may have been capable of intellectual property protection, as well as IP issues where portrayals of the Duke may also take in any art works being displayed behind the statue outside the GoMA.