

## **REVIEW: SCOTTISH ELITES**

*Elizabeth Dalkeith*

T.M.Devine (ed.) **Scottish Elites**, Edinburgh: John Donald, £18.50, pb, 1994, ISBN 0859764028, 192pp.

This volume, containing a series of essays first presented at the Historical Studies Seminar at Strathclyde University in 1991/92, attempts, in the words of its editor, T M Devine, to present some 'fresh and intriguing perspectives of dominant groups who have influenced and governed Scotland over the last 300 years'. It does, to its credit, admit that it cannot attempt to be a systematic examination of urban and rural elites, but the papers are all based on original research, and its claim, therefore, is to provide an analysis of some key aspects of 'elite experience' and, in doing so, question much received historical wisdom.

The central premise of this book, despite its almost too wide variety of subject matter, and the vast time span it covers - from 1688 to the present day - is the surprising fact, that despite the scale and speed of urbanisation and industrialisation, coupled with the decline in the rural economy and increasing mass enfranchisement, the ancient elite of aristocrats and lairds have maintained their power at both local and national levels far longer than might have been expected. The elites were able to transform their roles, with a measure of expedient concession, and to maintain their patronage of the key institutions of the church and education. It is these continuities - and also because, despite centralised industrialisation, the mass of land remained one of small towns, rural villages and farming landscapes - that leads Devine to the puzzled conclusion that, in these areas at least, the social influence of 'the big house' and their families remained considerable.

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To suggest that this is all the volume contains of importance would be remiss, but it is obviously of significance to this interested reviewer, and Devine, in his preface, devotes the lion's share of his analysis to it. It is, therefore, the substance of these chapters that seem to hold the central thesis of the book together, although it is clear that a neat division cannot be made into 'landed', 'mercantile' and 'professional' and the threads that bind these groups together in the intricate web of Scottish society are well documented in other chapters in the book.

So, to 'Yon Birkie, ca'd a laird' as Burns would have it. McInnes, in his detailed look at land ownership in Argyllshire, suggests that the stereotyped image of the Highland aristocracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not what it seemed, and that there, at least, with a surprising degree of dynamism and activity, the 'elites', although abandoning as elsewhere in 'Gaeldom' the responsibilities of clan leadership for entrepreneurship, did so in an environment of effective estate management and investment not usually thought of as part of the 'clearance culture'.

This degree of rational thinking is also highlighted in Cumming's intriguing look at the career of 'Grant of Monymusk', long known as an enlightened improver of the eighteenth century, but who is shown to have had to turn to agricultural transformation to escape financial ruin as a result of being involved in one of the shadiest business deals of his time. This expedient lesson, Cummings notes, made Grant realise that landowners such as he needed a degree of business acumen to make their estates financially viable. And Cummings concludes that Grant's career pointed the way to the long-term benefits that would accrue to enterprising Scotsmen as a result of the union of 1707.

Devine's essay on the agricultural revolution in Southern Scotland, often called 'the lowland clearances', is again a thoughtful re-examination of the orthodox view that the central social casualty in this period of change was the triumph of the large farm over the smallholding. In fact he contends that although there was an 'elite' of large farmers, these were actually more sensitive to economic and social realities than is usually allowed, and that in this complex mix, the smallholding, farm and croft, were just as relevant to their communities as the large grain farms of the Lothians.

The final chapters, in what is a thought-provoking book, concentrate, somewhat partisanly, on that now popular debate 'The Decline of the British Aristocracy'. Hutchison in his assessment of the Scottish nobility in politics over the period 1880 to 1939 peppers his paper with phrases charting the

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'definitive eclipse' of the peerage, or even its extinction, but suggests that somehow this elite managed to keep in touch with the Scottish sense of nationality with a curious amalgam of empire, military prowess, and astute use of Scottish history. He does caution, however, that any recovery in their political position was a 'fig leaf' for they were now accountable to mass democracy with no lingering deferential tendencies.

McCrone and Morris also examine this conventional wisdom that the economic and political power of 'the great lairds' went into terminal decline in the early twentieth century, but argue that this power has transformed into a new 'cultural legitimation' through their hold on the heritage industry. This insinuation of their own history into that of the nation justifies the social order, and if the nation's history can be told through that of the 'great families' then the one cannot be destroyed without the other.

The analysis of McCrone and Morris is an interesting if curious one, underpinned as it is by their prejudice that this particular elite can only be motivated by cynical self interest, rather than the more altruistic approach which their own chosen examples would appear to imply. Familiarity with some of their subjects suggest that the generally high standards of accuracy evident elsewhere in the volume have slipped in this concluding chapter.

The other essays provide 'pioneering discussions' of urban and business elites which are of equal value to the interested reader. McLaren focuses specifically on the relative positioning of the clergy, lawyers and doctors in nineteenth century Aberdeen, and both Slaven and Maver's detailed studies of urban authority structures and business leadership show meticulous and original research.

The book makes no claim to have produced a 'coherent' look at Scottish elites, but, within its framework, it is an interesting, if diffuse, text for discussion.

As to conclusions, perhaps the final word should lie on the book's cover, with its caricature engravings of figures in 'the clergy', 'the law', 'the farming community' and 'the military' - 'I pray for all', 'I plead for all', 'I maintain all', 'I fight all' run their respective legends. The final illustration shows Satan - 'I take all'. Sobering for us all!

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