

REVIEW: THE SCOTS AND THEIR PARLIAMENTS

Paul H. Scott

John R Young, **The Scottish Parliament, 1639-1661**, Edinburgh, John Donald, £30.00, hb, ISBN 0 85976 412 5, 362 pages.

Clyve Jones (editor), **The Scots and Parliament**, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press for the Parliamentary History Yearbook Trust, £12.95, pb, ISBN 0 7486 0823 0, 147 pages.

The introductions to both of these books comment on the neglect of the Scottish Parliament as a subject of historical research. There had been no substantial book about it since those of R. S. Rait and James Mackinnon which were both published in 1924. Now, almost simultaneously, we have two. John Young's impressive and important book is a very thorough and detailed analysis of the Parliament in the period from 1639 to 1661 which was one of intense political and constitutional change. **The Scots and Parliament** is a collection of essays on various aspects of the Parliament, or of Scottish participation in the British Parliament, between 1286 and 1832. These essays also are founded on fresh and innovative research. Evidently, this important aspect of our history is recovering from neglect.

In his Introduction to the collection of essays, William Ferguson discussed the reason for the neglect in the past. Scottish historians had largely accepted the view, derived from the work of Bishop Stubbs, that what really mattered was the evolution of the English Parliament and that any other Parliament which differed from that was of little account. The standard historians of the

Paul H. Scott is a vice-president of the SNP, the convener of the Advisory Council for the Arts in Scotland, and the president of Scottish P.E.N.. He has written very widely on Scottish politics, history, and culture.

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Scottish Parliament, R. S. Rait and C.S. Terry, accepted this notion as part of the imperial vision of their time.

If this attitude had been confined to the evolution of Parliament, it might be said to have had some practical justification because the British Parliament (in practice, but not according to the Treaty of Union) was merely the English Parliament continuing with the addition of a few Scottish members. The view of Parliament, however, was part of a wider attitude, against which Gordon Donaldson complained in one of his last lectures. (It was recently published in **Scotland's History; Approaches and Reflections**, edited by James Kirk, Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press, 1995). Scottish history, he said, has been distorted by being seen through the eyes of English historians who have the habit of writing of any country but their own in a 'patronising and consciously superior manner'.

George Davie in **The Democratic Intellect** spoke of a 'failure of intellectual nerve' among the Scots, roughly in the 100 years between the 1830s and the 1930s. There is no more striking example of this than in what Marinell Ash called 'the strange death of Scottish history'. We largely ceased to teach it in the schools, and such history as was written and taught accepted a predominantly English point of view. It was as if we were mesmerised by the wealth and power of the British state in the century after Waterloo when it was the strongest and most successful in the world. It seems that we have had to wait for the collapse of this power to take a more balanced and rational view.

In one of the essays in **The Scots and Parliament**, John Scally writes about the Scottish Parliaments of Charles I. He concludes that the Parliament between 1639 and 1641 evolved into a body 'robust enough to act as an effective buffer against an aggressive Crown'. This is also one of the main themes of John Young's book. When James VI flitted to London in 1603, the consequences of absentee kingship were modified by his understanding of Scotland and willingness to listen to Scottish advice. This system, as Young says, collapsed in 1625 when Charles I came to the throne as an anglicised monarch. Within 13 years the political nation in Scotland rebelled, and the instrument through which the revolt was directed was Parliament. The 1639 session began to work for the transfer of effective political power from the Crown to Parliament and this was achieved in the session of 1639-41. The royal prerogative was severely curtailed and the control of policy and of state appointments was assumed by parliament. A system of 15 committees was evolved to handle business, and a standing committee emerged to act

between parliamentary sessions. All of this, Young concludes, was a powerful example to be followed later by the Long Parliament in England. There were similarities with the rebellions at about the same time of Catalonia and Portugal against the Castilian monarchy, although 'compared to contemporary continental assemblies, the Scottish Parliament was remarkably powerful as a constitutional forum'.

The Scottish Parliament was swept away by the foreign occupation and subjugation under Cromwell in 1651. At the Restoration in 1660 the Scottish Parliament was revived, but the parliamentary developments of 1639 to 1651 were nullified. In Young's words, 'the northern Kingdom of Charles II would henceforth be politically controlled from London. A strong and powerful Scottish Parliament presented a threat to English dominance within the British archipelago and was inconsistent with a powerful British monarchy'.

Although it is outside the time scale of Young's book, the developments which he discusses have a bearing on the aspirations of the Scottish Parliament called in 1703 on the basis of the Revolutionary settlement of 1688-9. With the intellectual leadership of Fletcher of Saltoun, it too began to press for the transfer of power from the Crown, and therefore from the English Government, to itself. This would have been the effect of the Act of Security passed in 1703 and again, after royal assent had been withheld, in 1704. The threat that Scotland was again about to escape from their control caused the English Government to exercise a variety of pressures to achieve an incorporating Union. As after the invasion of Cromwell, Scottish parliamentary development was once again extinguished.

Three of the essays in **The Scots and Parliament** deal with Scottish elections to the post-union British Parliament, in the early 18th century, in 1774 and in 1832 after the Reform Act. It is a story of political corruption, largely caused by the remoteness of Westminster and the cynicism induced by the way in which the Union itself was achieved. The Reform Act had powerful effects in Scotland; but, William Ferguson says, 'it was a botch which ran counter to the law of Scotland'. In consequence, it ended the malpractices of the post-union system, only to open up a new form of corrupt electioneering.

May 1996