

REVIEW: SCOTLAND, AN UNWON CAUSE

Richard J. Finlay

Scott, P.H. (ed.), **Scotland: an Unwon Cause**, Edinburgh: Canongate, pb, £9.99, ISBN 0862417007, 228pp.

In many ways the result of the referendum on a Scottish parliament will change the way we now look at our history. If the confident determinism of British integration which characterised so much Scottish historical writing has given way to more guarded and ambivalent interpretations in recent times, the way now appears open for a full blooded nationalist reading of the Scottish past. Or does it? A recent work on the 'new' British history which endeavours to encompass the history of the four nations within one narrative, for example, was entitled **Uniting the Kingdom**, and we probably won't have to wait too long for the follow-up called **Dis-Uniting the Kingdom**. Certainly, given recent events, this second volume might seem more appropriate to contemporary concerns. It is one of the dangers of being a historian that if history changes direction, then all the previous signposts have to be altered in order to fit the new route. Yet, this debate seems a little semantic given that one of the key problems of Scottish history is the appalling ignorance that most Scots have about their own past. Although there are greater numbers of students in both the universities and schools studying Scottish history, it will take some time before we have a trickle down effect which impacts on Scottish society. Scottish historical ignorance can not be solved over night and one suspects that many of the journalists, educationalists, industrialists etc who make up the self-appointed cultural leaders of the nation will remain partially educated in the Scottish past simply through the gradual nature of demographic change. Despite the groans of many academics and teachers, it may be something that we just have to live with for the next ten years. While many can point to Ireland as a nation which has a confident, appreciative and realistic sense of its history, it has to be remembered that this is a society

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which has been schooled for several generations in its own historical awareness. Scotland can not achieve the same result without the same long-term cultural process and the current craze both for and against historical themeparks is only a symptom of the nation's immature appreciation of the past. Yet, for all the faults of **Braveheart**, historical novels and the tourist-driven Scottish historical experience in under thirty minutes, we can at least be grateful that most Scots are interested in their past.

It is both as an indicator of historical trends and as an accessible and readable volume that Paul Scott's book is to be welcomed. Most people will be aware of Scott's political leanings and it cannot be denied that this is of critical importance in shaping his selection of historical documents. Yet, as an exercise in tracing the nationalist thread through Scottish history, this is an impressive collection. Although many will dismiss the book as an assortment of nationalist propaganda, this would not do it justice. First, the book has a wide range of sources such as the Covenant, the Declaration of Arbroath, the Treaty of Union, the Claim of Right and others which are important texts in themselves, irrespective of the political slant which is put on them. Second, it has brought together important historical sources in manageable and affordable form which will permit a larger audience access to these authentic voices from the past. Indeed, it will make a good source book for schools and universities as well as providing the general reader with a short, but lively dash through Scottish history. Third, it contains a number of interesting snapshots of Scottish national identity through the ages. While Scott may view the extracts of Adam Smith and John Buchan, for example, from a nationalist perspective, it is open to the reader to make up his or her own mind. Finally, Scott has packed in a lot of extracts which are either short or have been edited down and this successfully captures the reader's attention. While purists will no doubt condemn this practice and point out that documents must be reproduced in their entirety, Scott's book has the advantage that it is readable and avoids the tendency to over analyse. In short, he lets the documents speak for themselves.

The extracts have a short introduction to set them in context and the book is sprinkled with historiographical pieces to show what previous historians have thought of key moments in Scottish history. On the whole this works well, although many may condemn its nationalist bias as Scott has cherry picked his extracts carefully to reflect his reading of the Scottish past. The inclusion of 'the Great Debate' of February 1992, for example, seems to jar a bit. Was this a turning point in Scottish history? In mitigation, it has to be pointed out that Scott is unapologetic about his vision of Scotland's past. Yet, for all that, the book is coherent and does trace a legitimate nationalist thread which runs

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through Scottish history; and in view of the result of the referendum, it is one that cannot be ignored or wished away.

In the interests of balance, however, the following suggestions can be made. First, an esteemed member of the Think Twice campaign should produce a companion volume called **Scotland: A Lost Cause** which could trace the disasters of Scottish history and the 'no can do' mentality. Special features could focus on the Scottish cringe, the Highland/Lowland divide, subsidy junkies etc. Second, armed with a major grant, the universities could produce several volumes of **Scotland: An Unsure Cause**, retailing at a mere sixty quid a volume. Each could compete for our attention and our society's need to understand its past. Let History judge the winner!

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