

REVIEW: NO GODS AND PRECIOUS FEW HEROES

Michael Fry

Christopher Harvie (1998), **No Gods and Precious Few Heroes**, third edition, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pb, £9.95, ISBN 0749609997.

Not many works of Scottish history run to third editions, and the appearance of this one is a tribute to the boost Christopher Harvie has given the subject. The first edition was meant, as a volume in an eight-part New History of Scotland, to deal with the twentieth century but necessarily stopped at the date of publication in 1981. We are now near enough to the millennium for the account to be completed in anticipation. Harvie ends on the midnight hour of 1999 when he forecasts, in a subjunctive echo of Jawaharlal Nehru, that 'Scotland would awake to freedom'.

The dramatic touch is not quite justified by the chronology, since the Scottish Parliament will by then have been at work for months, nor indeed by the history, unless freedom is equated with a modest measure of regional government. No doubt Harvie is one of those Nationalists certain it will lead straight on to independence. But this can hardly be a historical judgment when the alternative intended by the legislators, that Scotland will settle down to a less degrading form of provincial dependency, is at least as likely. What the hyperbole does to an extent do is save the intellectual structure of the book, which has appeared increasingly unsatisfactory since first publication.

We have all come far in two decades. The present Chancellor of the Exchequer is named in the original introduction as one who 'helped me kick ideas about', with other young things who have taken different paths or descended into oblivion. The author's own odyssey from Labour into the Scottish National Party, rare but not unique, has kept his pecker up in a way

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that might have been less possible had he fellow-travelled with Gordon Brown.

Harvie now strikes me as like those Scots at the time of the Union - William Paterson springs to mind - who found their way from the mainstream of presbyterian patriotism into outré unionism (except of course that he has gone in the opposite direction). They tended to have ingenious, not to say extravagant, brains, transported with delight to find at last a definitive solution to the fathomless problems of the age. They then set about painting the old Scotland in the darkest colours, so that the light burst all the more effulgently upon her in 1707. Harvie emerges in a reverse image of that, though Whig yet in his teleology.

In retrospect, 1981 was a bad year to write Scottish history, as bad as 1914, given Scotland's tendency to extremes. In 1914 the history would have been euphoric. That was the kind of history that Peter Hume Brown had just finished writing. It was the kind of history that survived even in Olive and Sydney Checkland's account of the Victorian and Edwardian eras, uniform in the series with Harvie's. Their final page is a lyrical celebration of Scottish identity at the apogee before the First World War. A reader proceeding straight to the sequel by Harvie is plunged without explanation into black gloom.

In his hands it remained a melancholy story, if anything growing worse rather than better. By the end of the first edition the referendum of 1979 had been lost and the cause of devolution seemed hopeless. Scots had a Government they did not want, one which hardly bothered to conceal its hostility to their cherished ways of running things. The structure of subsidised industry built up by a half-century of regional aid faced collapse, and rescue was now out of the question. Taxes, inflation and unemployment rose at once. Christopher Harvie, and others of his kidney such as Neal Ascherson and Tom Nairn, obviously had no choice but to forsake the land of their fathers and seek a refuge in kinder climes.

It could come as no surprise, then, that more or less unrelieved depression pervaded that first edition of **No Gods and Precious Few Heroes**, its tone indicated by its very title. The author perceived the odd dim beam shining fitfully through this national night, but in the end only as cruel delusion, showing no way out. There was not only no light, but no tunnel, in the sense of a path seeming to lead somewhere. To conceive that Scotland might yet shape her own destiny was merely to hope against hope.

I was not the only reviewer at the time to point out that this, as a picture of the twentieth century to date, was overdrawn. Politics may have turned arid

again, culture remained desultory, but it was beyond dispute that life for the vast majority of Scots had got incomparably better. The worries of daily life in 1900 lay in toil, tenements, tuberculosis and so on; by 1981, it was services, semis and slimming. Should not a general history somehow reflect this?

Harvie has taken a little account of such criticism, in his addenda to the subsequent editions and to a more limited extent in revisions of the primary text. The latest version has the changes set in slightly different typefaces, so that the reader may conveniently trace the evolution of the sage's thought.

As in 1981, it was perhaps a mistake to have written up some of this too instantly. The sections bringing the story right down to the present day tend to be crammed higgledy-piggledy with every event of the remotest conceivable importance; though some will soon be forgotten, especially by-elections. Harvie is also tempted to confuse importance with his own interests. A railway freak, he solemnly records the inauguration of the Channel Tunnel as an event in Scottish history, on the grounds that it brought Scotland within 20 hours of Brussels: he is apparently unimpressed by the fact that you can fly there in 90 minutes. To be fair, though, he also thinks the reopening of the track to Bathgate and Paisley Canal are milestones in the national story.

More significant are the passages where he has slipped in a defence against those charges of despondent partiality. There is a strained argument that, while the standard of living in Scotland may have risen, that in Sweden has risen more, thus confirming the basic dismal thesis. But one simple comparison means damn-all: I can myself reach at this moment to my shelves and find figures showing Scots are today 24 per cent richer than Swedes (courtesy of OECD, 1996, purchasing power parities, net post-tax income).

The section on the economy, which the first time round was a pure exercise in beating of the breast and gnashing of the teeth, now starts off like this:

There was a mighty paradox about the Scottish economy after World War II. ... On the one hand accelerated growth, and a fair distribution of its dividends, was the work of the later period; on the other, these two decades have also seen the collapse of traditional industries, the general weakening of manufacture in both relative and absolute terms, mounting unemployment, continued emigration and what seems to be endemic social and political instability.

I can quibble at some of the economic detail. Scottish unemployment is no longer mounting, and is indeed running at less than half the level in Harvie's

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beloved region of exile, Baden-Württemberg, which he lauds for owing 40 per cent of its product to manufacturing. And what 'seems to be' instability to Harvie seems to be quite the opposite to me, compared to several other European regions I could name - what about Northern Ireland, for a start, or the Basque Country or Corsica or Sicily or Saxony?

A historiographical point is more significant, however. If Harvie had been writing the volume the Checklands wrote, he could have remarked that 'there was a mighty paradox about the Scottish economy after the Napoleonic wars ... on the one hand accelerated growth ... on the other, collapse of traditional industries, traumatic contraction of agriculture, spread of urban squalor, unemployment, emigration, instability, etc...'. But in order to arrive at a rounded view of the nineteenth century he would have had finally to concede that there was in reality no paradox at all. It was *because* Scotland had cast aside her traditional structures that she could make such stupendous advances during her most successful epoch to date. It may be as well to ask whether the analogy can be extended to the twentieth century.

But Harvie's underlying assumptions drive him to a different conclusion, vainly searched for in the first edition, tentatively proposed in the second and explicitly achieved in the third, no doubt to the author's great relief. For he had come perilously close to positing that, while Scots had a past, they might have no future. Now he has found the means to avoid tipping over into that abyss. His valedictory picture of Scotland's twentieth century is of continual disaster redeemed at the last moment by Nationalism. We shall just have to wait till the twenty-first century to see if that judgment is true.

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