

REVIEW: MODERN SCOTTISH HISTORY VOLS 2 AND 4

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Anthony Cooke, Ian Donnachie, Ann MacSween and Christopher A. Whatley (eds) (1998), **Modern Scottish History 1707 To The Present. Volume 2: Essays: The Modernisation of Scotland, 1850 to the Present. Volume 4: Readings, 1850 to the Present.** East Linton: Tuckwell Press Ltd, pbs, £14.99 each, ISBNs 186232073X, 1862320837, 308pp, 304pp.

These volumes form part of a distance learning collaboration between the University of Dundee and the Open University in Scotland for Honours-level study of modern Scottish history (see <http://www.dundee.ac.uk/history>)¹. The two volumes covered here deal with the period since 1850. Thirteen topic essays were commissioned for volume 2 from leading historians and social scientists to provide a 'reasonably comprehensive' introduction to recent historical research and to stimulate further research. Topic essay breadth is complemented in volume 4 by a selection of twenty-two more specialised articles.

With distance learning in mind, the topic essays differ from recent collections like the **People and Society in Scotland** (1988-90) series or the single volume **Scotland in the Twentieth Century** (1996), although many of the same authors and topics overlap. Layout, exposition and content are shaped by pedagogical concerns well-known to anyone familiar with the Open University's justly renowned written materials. Broad topic essays conform to a standard format, punctuated at regular intervals by activity exercises to encourage students to reflect on key issues, study primary sources (in volume 5) and deepen understanding through the additional readings in volume 4.

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¹ *Volumes 1, 3 and 5 are reviewed elsewhere in the present issue of Scottish Affairs.*

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The topic essays record enormous change in Scotland since 1850. For most contributors, the face of Scottish society is pockmarked by 'who are we?' and 'what is to be done?' questions. For most of this period, the 'who' of national identity was trapped between the seeming irreconcilables of cultural nationalism and political unionism, while the 'what' of economy and state relations swapped de jure political sovereignty for the practical de facto autonomy needed for economic breakthrough and, later, social welfare.

Ian Levitt's chapter on the state charts the gradual devolution of administrative power from the centre as a long drawn-out affair, largely dependent on economic conditions, Scottish discontent and the bargaining skills of administrators. Richard Finlay tells a similar story of Scottish pragmatism over national identity. First, Empire and, after 1945, the welfare state gave a material basis to a widespread sense of Britishness. Finlay tends to assume the existence of a prior and 'authentic' Scottish national identity, pre-dating the Union state and carried into the twentieth century solely by popular working class culture (volume 2, p.38). This ignores the extent to which modern national identity in Scotland was formed only as part of the consolidation of British national consciousness, itself brought into existence by the partnership struck in a truly Anglo-Scottish Empire (Davidson 1999, Ch.10).

As early success became a necessary condition of later failure, especially after 1920, deep-rooted problems beset industry in Scotland. Peter Payne details an ossified industrial structure shored-up only by war and state intervention. Pragmatic expediency in matters of state, nation and economy to meet material realities could not sustain British corporatist assumptions to the end of the twentieth century. As many of the essays make clear, 'welfare nationalism' in Scotland acquired a new salience in the face of Thatcherism. Finlay (volume 2, p.42) argues that 'paradoxically, the upsurge in nationalist support was driven by a desire to realise the aims and ideals of corporate Britain' - the self-same 'civic' ideals originally promoted by outgoing 'red' Scots, a theme Christopher Harvie resumes in his chapter on culture.

National myths, such as the 'lad o' pairts' in education discussed by Anderson, can become self-fulfilling prophecies where they draw attention to shortcomings in reality. But myths, of class, gender, race or religion, also function to reinforce mono-visions of Scotland. In this vein, the myth of Scotland as romantic wilderness informs Lambert's chapter on Leisure, with its undue emphasis on countryside recreation. Except for drinking and pub society, Lambert only impressionistically touches on urban culture and neglects the pervasive influence of pop youth cultures since the 1950s. A

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wider problem of what exactly is distinctive about popular culture in Scotland needs to be considered, especially since most work assumes a uniform British context. A recent textbook on British Cultural Identities (Storry and Childs 1997) could only make a single reference to Scotland.

In contrast to wilderness fantasies, flight from both Highland and Lowland rural societies de-populated the land. Ewan Cameron charts the patterns of clearance in the Highlands and the politics of Land as contingent on a social and economic structure vulnerable to the earth-shattering powers of landowners, the state and industrial capitalism. In the Lowlands, Gavin Sprott draws attention to a changing agricultural labour process and the social structures it supported. From labour-intensive seasonal toil, Lowland agriculture was dealt a 'double whammy' by capital-intensification and countryside 'preservationists', hastening de-population. Sprott (volume 2, p.208) concludes that the post-war planner's fantasy had by the 1980s pummeled the natural and social rural fabric into 'either a food factory, a dormitory, or a playground'.

So while William Kenefick shows that the population almost doubled between 1840 and 1970, population flow was into Scotland's industrial heartland. Irish immigration to Scotland is fairly well documented. Only the English increased their number at each successive census. Very little research has been carried out on the experience of English immigration. Surprisingly, Kenefick neglects the experience of immigration from the Asian sub-continent since the 1950s. Further research is undoubtedly needed into the nature of racism and national identity in Scotland.

Callum Brown notes that Islam defied the secularisation trend in Scotland. Other Church adherence rose to a high point in the 1920s but fell to around one quarter of the population by 1994 - the same level as 1850! The character of Protestantism in Scotland underwent significant changes, from conservative 'private clubs' of Victorian respectability to often radical social reformism in recent decades. Brown's chapter on religion is more effective than most in making links to other topics and to sociological research into the decline of organised religion, especially youth dis-affiliation.

Bob Morris also employs a sociological framework, Louis Wirth's 1930s model of urbanism as size, density and variety. Unfortunately, this explanatory promise is lost since Morris fails to re-examine the adequacy of Wirth's model in the light of Scottish urbanism. Morris's evidence makes clear that 'urbanism' is experienced differently according to class. With affluence comes space, diversity and suburbanised consumption; with

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poverty comes a physically inferior, spatially cramped, isolating and hostile environment. Although absolute measures of overcrowding, disease and squalor may have eased they continue to stunt working class lives to the present day.

Working class women historically bore the brunt of public squalor and private oppression. How far has this changed? Arthur MacIvor notes that the extent, timing and cause of narrowing gender inequalities is disputed among historians. In any case, it is going too far to say that a 'quiet revolution' has been effected. Just how distinctive patriarchy was, and is, in Scotland demands comparative analysis, something missing from most chapters.

Questions of historical process, conjuncture and contingency are addressed most clearly by John Foster, who usefully divides up his chapter into sections on definitions, debates, sources and episodes. Although currently unfashionable in Foster's own discipline of sociology, a fundamental theoretical debate is introduced between Weberian and Marxist conceptions of class. Foster's definition of class as 'a device for categorizing people' (volume 2, p.210) is not entirely convincing. Class, a real abstraction from actual social relations of exploitation, is more than an analytical device for Marxists. Nevertheless, Foster nicely sets-up a debate around Scottish distinctiveness, class-consciousness and 'post-industrial' society. Key here is whether the direction of historical causality is propelled by values, beliefs and culture (Weber) or by material socio-economic antagonisms (Marx). While acknowledging some limitations to documentary sources and oral history, Foster employs them to give a sense of the rupture with Liberal hegemony in Scotland after 1914 and the emergent dynamics of independent working class organisation and ideology. 'Culture', for Foster (volume 2, p.227), 'is not therefore seen as something constant and self-sustaining but is itself mediated by the balance of class relations'.

This sets Foster apart from Harvie's narrow definition of 'culture'. Based on Mathew Arnold's notion of 'harmonious perfection', Harvie sweeps through the big names of 'culture' from Thomas Carlyle to Alasdair Gray, dwelling on Patrick Geddes' version of 'civic humanism'. An elitist ideology of public service was exported by 'red' Scots 'on the make'. The cultural starburst of the 1980s reinvigorated national(ist) politics in Scotland but, Harvie contends, 'civic' discourses subsequently deteriorated. At Harvie's rarified altitude, an emerging negative distinctiveness is exemplified by Irvine Welsh's **Trainspotting**, 'a glorification of deviant lifestyle as fashionable and toxic as Glasgow's razor-gangs of MacArthur and Long's **No Mean City** (1934)' (volume 2, p.295). Harvie also rips into Marxism, rightly taking

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Georg Lukacs to task for failing to identify Walter Scott as Scottish but neglects to also note Lukacs' insights into the historicism and pre-modern, hence pre-national, setting of Scott's novels, something Harvie has attended to elsewhere (Samuel 1989). More ludicrously, Harvie accuses Lewis Grassie Gibbon of echoing Nazi Blut-und-Boden (blood and soil). This is not exactly student-friendly stuff! Unless students are already familiar with Harvie's basic argument and his casually introduced authorities, I have no idea what they will make of the knowing tone and curt asides of the chapter's crazily paved narrative.

Harvie's chapter encapsulates in miniature something of the overall chaotic detail of the volumes. Inattentive readers will miss some of the underlying and contradictory assumptions made between different chapters. Perhaps, therefore, an introductory essay mapping-out the field of study and highlighting different approaches and arguments would be helpful. Some cross-referencing across the different chapters might also help the reader to find their way around controversies and debates. For instance, McIvor (volume 2, p.261) makes the assertion in passing that 'social class divisions have undoubtedly dissipated', something challenged head-on by Foster (volume 2, p.232). Payne's (volume 2, p.77) assumption about the necessity and efficacy of market institutions and the 'damaging long-term consequences of politically-inspired attempts to stem structural adaptation to changing economic circumstances', is clearly out of step with the positive light in which state intervention is viewed by virtually every other chapter. Or, consider the ways in which industrial decline (Payne), urban change (Morris), rural depopulation (Cameron, Sprott), female paid employment (McIvor), patterns of migration, mortality and birth (Kenefick) and growing secularisation (Brown), mutually shape each other.

The closer the essays move into the present the more problematic the topics become. In common with much recent writing on Scotland, the editors of these volumes understandably claim that 'now is a particularly appropriate moment' (volume 2, p.v) for bringing the fruits of historical research before a wider audience. But when is now? In the context of New Labour, New Deal, New Scotland, and so on, temporarily buoyed by the cult for immediacy, novelty and forgetfulness, a rounded historical understanding is sorely needed, if only for ersatz newness to be opened up to inspection.

Largely by-passed by post-war Marxist historiography, the subsequent revisionist recoil and the challenge of historical sociology, Scottish historiography is now in ironic danger of pressing traditional anglo-empiricism into the service of a supposedly distinctive 'New Scotland'.

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History is imagined as a chronology of linear, serialised time, composed of installments of 'one damn thing after another'. Assiduous followers of soap-opera Scottish history can only gawk at each passing episode in the long-running series of national psycho-dramatics.

The volumes under review here are indeed hostages to just such a misfortune. Underlying this is a one-sided materialism that largely eschews generalisation but pays attention to sequences of facts. Great stress is levied throughout on the practice of historical investigation; indeed readers are encouraged to use the volumes as 'tool-kits'. Of course, scrupulous techniques of careful documentary analysis and oral history remain a necessary activity for empirical enquiry. For instance, Morris (volume 2, p.133) draws attention to everyday artefacts as documents of urban experience, from 'the manhole covers cast by some forgotten company in Falkirk' to 'nineteenth century sanitary ware from Barrhead', while Anderson asks how reliable a signature on a marriage certificate is as a guide to literacy levels. Yet, one need not accept the current fashion for a cavalier approach to historical facts to view a dearth of explicit theorisation and reflection on the historical process and the practice of doing history as anything other than a failure of the historical imagination.

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October 1998