

REVIEW: GLENCOE AND THE END OF THE HIGHLAND WAR

James Hunter

Paul Hopkins, **Glencoe and the End of the Highland War**, John Donald,
Edinburgh, 1986, reprinted 1995, ISBN 0 85976 490 7, pb, £25, 543pp.

A particular approach to Scotland's past is presently in the ascendancy among the growing number of academics whose job it is to teach, and write about, our history. That approach is not without its virtues. But it possesses vices, too, and practically all of those are apparent in Paul Hopkins's account of the events surrounding the Massacre of Glencoe.

Three sentences into the preface to the paperback edition of Hopkins's book, the reader encounters the following passage:

In my most important source, the Breadalbane Papers (SRO GD 112), the sections I most used were GD112/39 and /40, Correspondence, and /43, State Papers including more correspondence. Since 1986, Dr B.L.H. Horn has produced an excellent complete catalogue of GD112, entirely rearranging and renumbering these sections in the process. A new GD112/39 has been created, consisting of all the letters in the old /39 and /40, and the letters (but not orders) from /43 - the most important being Viscount Dundee's letter of 20 July 1689 - rearranged in chronological order. The former reference numbers in the old /39 and /40 are included. The new GD 112/40 is the small section of royal letters, formerly /42; the present /42 consists of miscellanea. The one doubtful policy decision was to break up and disperse between sections the original bundles of letters and documents (in 112/43) assembled for different purposes by Breadalbane's agents while defending him against the 1695 treason charge.

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The information here presented is of some small moment, I guess, to two or three of Paul Hopkin's academic colleagues and, perhaps, to a couple of staff members in the Scottish Record Office. To virtually everyone else who might chance to open this book, that paragraph - the second one the reader comes to - is meaningless gobbledegook. And had Paul Hopkins wished to minimise both his sales and the impact of his findings, then he could scarcely have hit on a better device for so doing.

In the war of attrition which he is evidently determined to unleash on his potential customers, however, Hopkins's second paragraph constitutes his reserve army. His frontline troops are deployed in an opening paragraph where the author apologises for his 'faults of style' and advises 'general readers' to 'skip ruthlessly' through chapters 'clogged by the need to set events in a wide context'.

Since Paul Hopkins thinks, according to his preface, that his book - despite its 543 closely-printed pages - suffers from 'over-compression', my question is probably superfluous. But did it really not occur to anyone associated with this publication - whether its author, his academic associates or his publishers - that so discursive a book might have benefited from pruning of a sort intended to render it more comprehensible to that wider readership Paul Hopkins seems so desperate to put off?

As a result of his burrowings in the Breadalbane Papers and elsewhere, Paul Hopkins knows more than anyone else about the complicated politicking which was going on in the Highlands and Islands in the closing decades of the seventeenth century. His mastery of the archival sources is clearly unrivalled. And in that respect he is an exemplar of an approach to the past - currently dominant, as noted at the outset, among academics with an interest in Scotland's history - which considers archival-based research to be virtually the beginning and the end of scholarship.

But what is the point of discovering practically everything that can be discovered about some historical episode if, as is so woefully apparent in Paul Hopkins's case, you cannot make your discoveries known in a form which people can understand? Should academic historians not have written into their job descriptions some responsibility to communicate clearly with the public who, after all, pay their wages? Should the folk who train our historians not be spending at least some time inculcating the narrative and other basic skills of which books like Hopkins's are so appallingly bereft?

It is not as if there is no market for well written history. The worldwide sales achieved by Eric Hobsbawm and Linda Colley, to instance two very different historians, make that point. And for all that books on purely Scottish themes

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are obviously of less general appeal than books of the sort Hobsbawm and Colley have produced, Scotland's political and cultural regeneration has undoubtedly had the effect of generating a growing demand for publications which tell readers something of how Scotland came to be the way it is.

It may be, of course, that academic historians of the Paul Hopkins variety are simply writing the wrong sort of history. It is no accident that Hobsbawm and Colley, to stick with my previous examples, do not spend much time among dusty documents of the type cited so frequently in the 130 pages of footnotes - accounting for about a quarter of his publication's total length - which Hopkins appends to his book. Hobsbawm and Colley deal with big, intellectually challenging, subjects. Maybe we need to see such subjects rather more frequently ventilated in a Scottish context - at the expense, if necessary, of further quarrying among the Breadalbane Papers and their many equivalents. Why, for instance, was it left to Linda Colley, an English woman working in the United States, to pose such fascinating questions - in **Britons: Forging the Nation** - as she does about the highly topical issue of how exactly Scots started to consider themselves British? Instead of poring interminably over the contents of all those files and boxes so handily - maybe too handily - available in the Scottish Record Office, might not some of our younger academic historians fruitfully spend some time just thinking?

But what of Paul Hopkins with whom I began? Well, anyone obliged to grapple with the detail of seventeenth-century Scotland will be obliged also to grapple with Paul Hopkins's book. But anyone simply wishing to get some idea of what the Massacre of Glencoe was all about would do much better to turn to John Prebble's thirty-year old account of that particular episode. If you stick with Prebble's book, **Glencoe: The Story of the Massacre**, you will not be aware, admittedly, of the extent to which Paul Hopkins feels obliged to 'contradict' it. But you will emerge from Prebble's pages - as you most certainly won't from Hopkins's - with some fairly coherent notion of the background, particularly the Highland background, to the Glencoe killings. You will also have had the enormous privilege of spending a bit of time in the company of a man who, in his prime, could out-write the very angels.

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