

## **REVIEW: HISTORY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY**

*David McCrone*

D.Broun, R.J.Finlay and M.Lynch (eds) (1998), **Image and Identity: The Making and Re-making of Scotland Through the Ages**, Edinburgh: John Donald, pb, £14.95, ISBN 0859764095, 236pp.

W.Ferguson (1998), **Identity and the Scottish Nation: An Historic Quest**, Edinburgh University Press, pb, £14.95, ISBN 0748610715, 341pp.

*To have common glories in the past, a common will in the present; to have accomplished great things together, to wish to do so again, that is the essential condition for being a nation.*

When the French historian Ernest Renan asked his famous question - What is a Nation? - he made the equally famous assertion that 'getting history wrong' is an essential part of the answer. He did not mean by this that nationalists are particularly bad historians, but that selective forgetting as well as selective remembering is a crucial part of the national project. There is, however, still more to it than that. Renan was addressing his fellow French citizens in 1882, a particularly crucial period in the formation of national consciousness. The point he was making was that remembering who one was in national terms required an active process of forgetting, a positive rewriting of history. Being national, in other words, meant a 'daily plebiscite', an idea best translated as a conscious and active (hence, daily) attestation of one's national identity.

Scottish historians especially will smile wryly at Renan's question. They have long found themselves caught up in the war of Scottish national identity, as active participants as well as innocent bystanders. Scottish history has been accused of having had a 'strange death', of having come to an end in 1707 when 'British' history took over. The usual response has been to tell it like it

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was, to take cover in facts and events. This was the 'facts are chieftains that win' view of history.

In recent years, history in Scotland has taken a new cultural turn. Its craft skills, long of the highest order, have been applied to the writing of history itself, to historiography. These two books mark an important milestone in this process of engagement with the Scottish national question. Their intent to do so is reflected in their strong titles in which 'image', 'identity' and 'nation' lay out the issues to be covered.

The collection of essays edited by Dauvit Broun, Richard Finlay and Michael Lynch reminds us that the debate about which Scotland we are talking about is older than the country itself. Broun makes the startling point that it was possible for someone in the two hundred years from 1018 to see 'Scotland' as only part of the area ruled by the king of Scots. Similarly, 'Scots' as a term for the kingdom's inhabitants did not gain universal acceptance in written sources until the late 13th century. Indeed, he points out that 'Scotia' in the 12th and early 13th centuries described that part of Scotland north of the Forth, south of Moray, and east of the central Highlands. In other words, 'Scotland and the Scots are, first and foremost, images which have been adapted and recreated according to the experiences and aspirations of the society to which they related' (p.11).

Lest we wonder what on earth our forebears were up to, let us remind ourselves that in the late 20th century the 'Scots' can refer to those people who live here, people who were born here, and people who claim ancestry and lineage as Scots. The fact that we do not get exercised about what being a Scot really means simply reflects the fact that we don't have to choose; it isn't a political issue.

It seems that the 'modern' conception of Scotland only came into existence in the 13th century in the context of the English wars. While we should beware of reading 20th century concerns too readily into a history which is surely as inaccessible to us as any foreign country, we find it irresistible not to read the Declaration of Arbroath other than in modern terms. It is simply too 'modern' a text to be ignored. Ted Cowan makes the astute observation that it is both a modern and a historic document. Most of us are familiar with the famous bits - 'for as long as one hundred of us' etc - but the previous sentence is the key. It speaks of the constraints on kingly power:

Yet if he [the king] should give up what he has begun, seeking to make us or our kingdom subject to the king of England or the English, we would strive at once to drive him out as our enemy and a subverter of his own

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right and ours, and we would make some other man who would be able to defend us our king.

Cowan argues that this is the first national or governmental articulation in all of Europe of the principle of contractual theory of the monarchy which is at the root of modern constitutionalism. Fiona Watson points out that the statement is less an early assertion of popular sovereignty than one which was shot through with justification for Bruce's kingship. In other words, it was precisely the success against England which set up the crown as the mainstay of the country's independence. If you couldn't achieve this, then you were out. Whichever view is true - and there is no reason why they both can't be - we see how a historic item is both a creation of its time as well as an essentially modern political statement. That is its power, its charge, that it can be detached from its historic location and speaks to another age. Key documents are exactly like that.

Ferguson's book is an elegant and lucid demonstration of this. A lifetime's craft as a historian of Scotland provides a unique guide to how the business of identity has been handled by his own trade. Crucial to this enterprise is the construction and mobilisation of myth-history or mythopoeia. Why so? At root is the national question. What right does Scotland have to exist, and how can it be justified? Scotland's origin-myths have been a battleground in their own right. A succession of historians have mobilised fragments of knowledge, which, to the modern reader's eye, often look arcane.

Much rested on who the founding peoples were judged to be: the Scots or the Picts. John of Fordun in the 14th century tended to minimise the Pictish roots in favour of the 'Scots', that is, the Gaels from Ireland. The purpose of his claim was in part to counter English claims that 13th and 14th century Scots were Britons really, and hence descended from the same Trojan roots as the English. Hector Boece who was born in the second half of the 15th century took the claim further forward by claiming that it was the 'Scots' who resisted the Romans, who conquered the Picts, and held out against the Norse and the English. He also subscribed to the 'forty kings' lineage of Scottish monarchs around whom much of the ideological battle over Scotland's origins was subsequently to rage. The Protestant reformer and historian George Buchanan in the 16th century was also a subscriber to the forty kings theory, and accepted that the 'Scots' had come from Ireland (not at all what our modern prejudices would lead us to think), though he differed from Boece in certain details.

Thomas Innes, Catholic priest and Jacobite of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, took a contrary view that the key founding peoples were the Picts,

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not the Scots, and rejected the forty kings view. Innes began what Ferguson calls Pictomania, which later fed into a bizarre view, put about by John Pinkerton in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, that not only were the Picts the true aboriginal peoples, but they had Gothic (that is, Teutonic) roots - just like the English. In the 16th century, the historian John Major - much like his 20th century namesake - took to arguing that Scotland as well as England had had their day, and that there was a need for a 'British' realm. James Macpherson of Ossian fame fell foul in the 18th century of massive anti-Scottish feeling in England, stoked by Pinkerton's Celtophobia, whose aim was to rubbish the origin-myths of its new partner in the Union, the Scots. Ferguson makes the point that latter-day Unionists like the English historian Hugh Trevor-Roper were still employing Celtophobic arguments to bolster their political beliefs.

For himself, and stepping outside the debate over Scottish historiography for the moment, Ferguson argues that modern research shows fairly unequivocally that the Scots of Dalriada of the 6th century were undoubtedly the most significant founding tribe. This was reflected in their influence the length and breadth of what is now Scotland. Further, in the first millennium at least, Scotia referred to Ireland too (as Scotia major, with 'Scotland' as Scotia minor). From the late middle ages, Scots and Irish became separate and distinct nations, with the former deliberately obscuring their origins in order to make a political point.

Ferguson points out that all post-Roman peoples had origin-myths in order to stake their territorial claims as the empire fell apart. The medieval English appropriated the Brutus legend - of Trojan origin - from the Britons, so that Edward I's claim to Scotland - under the influence of his own historian Geoffrey of Monmouth - was underwritten by it. It was no surprise then that the Scots mobilised the origin legend of Gaidel Glas who, depending on which version one reads, was either the husband or son of Scota, daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt. He came to Hibernia from Spain - allegedly. The key point here is that the Scots (and the Irish) were deemed to have Greek (not Trojan) roots, and could not possibly be of the same root stock as the English, naturally.

The modern reader can have huge fun with all this, but it has a deadly serious import: whether or not Scotland had the ideological right to a distinct existence from England. If it can be shown that the Scots are really the same people as the English, then why not a single kingdom, state? It is the terms in which this debate is held in history which is different, not the political intent. For example, anti-Ossianists were out to obliterate Scotland's Celtic past, and

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to show its lowland/teutonic origins. The Highland/Lowland debate in Scotland hasn't gone away either in the late 20th century.

We too have our own versions of these debates. To be sure, we don't take too seriously any more our blood-roots, preferring to celebrate our mongrel origins as a measure of our pluralism and openness. We prefer to discuss what is meant by being Scottish and British in terms of political and social values, and whether somehow we lost our sense of Scottishness in 1707 or not. To take one example of a fairly dominant myth of powerful provenance: it used to be said (still is, in places) that Scots had lost their capacity for self-rule (home rule or independence) because our culture (and personalities) were incomplete, deformed, and subject to feelings of inferiority and cringe. Many highly intelligent folk were happy to go along with this socio-psychoanalytic explanation without so much as a shred of evidence. Who are we then to laugh at theories claiming us to be Greeks or Trojans?

In a fascinating chapter in the Broun et al book, Graeme Morton even suggests that maybe nationalism was not missing in the dark ages of the 19th century, but was alive and well in an early form of what in our day has come to be known as 'civic' nationalism. In other words, maybe Scotland was not hoddin' doon either by its own psychic inadequacies or by a quasi-imperialist British state. Maybe what we had was actually de facto independence of a sort that made sense in the 19th century, but no longer? Morton asks: 'what if?' If Scotland was actually 'nationalist' in these terms, then don't we have to rewrite our history - again? Renan was right: getting history right or wrong, it's vital to keep asking the question.

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