

REVIEW: SCOTTISH POPULAR POLITICS

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W. Hamish Fraser, 2000, **Scottish Popular Politics**, ISBN 1902930118,
Edinburgh: Polygon, pb, £12.99

This is not a book aimed at the general reader since it assumes throughout that the reader is already familiar with the major political events and characters of Scottish and British political history since the end of the eighteenth century. Hamish Fraser unashamedly addresses himself to the relatively small community of historians, undergraduates or amateur history enthusiasts. Given that he also seeks to trace the links between Scottish radicalism since the late 18th century and the Labour Party of today, what he has to say will also interest the wider community of Scottish Labour and other political activists.

This is not intended as a criticism of his work. His account of how popular politics emerged in Scotland is always fascinating and should become an essential text for anyone trying to make sense of Scottish politics at the beginning of this new century.

Those of us fond of invoking 'the Scottish people' in support of whatever claim we happen to be making at the time, should at least have some notion of who 'the people' are and how they influenced the politics of our past, thereby helping to shape the politics of our own day. **Scottish Popular Politics** makes this a much easier task than it otherwise would be.

The 'people' make their first appearance towards the end of the eighteenth century as the 'mob' - burning and rioting, on occasion even lynching, but always capable of terrifying those in authority over them. Whether they are rescuing smugglers, forcing the sale of hoarded grain at prices they can afford, or stringing up the captain of the city guard, their message to the powerful and the wealthy was always consistent and clear: there are limitations on what we will allow you to do to us.

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As Hamish Fraser makes clear, their rioting then was a form of social protest against the perceived failure of those in authority to provide for the welfare of the people. The people's demands were simple: their political masters were expected to ensure that food was available and affordable, that the excise man did not price drink beyond the people's reach and that there was sufficient freedom for them to go about their daily business without too much interference.

'Politics' as such were not for them but were the preserve of the property-owning classes. The then big 'political' issues of burgh, county and parliamentary reform were fought out between the ruling land-owning classes and the new commercial and professional middle classes not yet admitted into the corridors of late eighteenth century power. These 'political' matters neither interested nor directly affected the mass of the people, described at the time by one wealthy merchant and parliamentary reformer as 'disqualified by a natural ignorance and hebetude, which render them unfit to be their own directors and, therefore, they must be directed by others'. Few in eighteenth century Scotland, even among the people themselves, would have taken exception to such a remark.

For the benefit of the modern reader, Hamish Fraser goes on to tell the tale of how this narrow form of elite politics, rooted in contempt for the mass of the people, was progressively and gradually undermined and ultimately replaced by a form of democratic politics in which 'the people' as opposed to 'property' became the decisive force. In telling this tale, he charts a fascinating course through the course of Scottish political history from the revolutionary fervour unleashed in the Scotland of the 1790's by events in France to the almost sedate but just as revolutionary transfer of political authority to our new Parliament on the Mound following a peaceful and orderly people's referendum.

This is a tale spanning more than two centuries and linking diverse political events and movements in a new, and at least for me, exciting synthesis. It is held together by Hamish Fraser's argument that there exists a continuous thread running through this variegated history and it is the growing belief in 'politics' as a powerful means of improving the life of the people previously excluded from politics altogether - the 'people below'.

Central to his argument is the debt owed by the Labour Party to radicalism and to radical Liberalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Labour, he argues, is the inheritor of political traditions that long pre-date its own foundation a century ago. He reminds us that Scottish movements and

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campaigns 'from the eighteenth century, by their commitment to the spread of democracy, contributed language, tradition and personnel to the formation of the Labour Party at the beginning of the twentieth century'.

There are few who would disagree with much of this argument. Tom Paine's **The Age of Reason** was reputed to be among the books on Keir Hardie's bookshelf. Thomas Muir was transported for daring to preach political reform among those described by Lord Braxfield as the lower classes of people. Had he been around in 1900, Muir would have been a natural for membership of 'the people's party'. Even the Chartists with their linking of parliamentary change to social and economic progress for workers would recognise the sentiment behind Labour's recent campaign song 'Things can only get better'. Certainly, the 'moral force' Chartists who dominated the movement in Scotland and who preached the gospel of slow advancement through moral improvement would be at ease with the current New Labour message of rights depending upon responsibilities.

Yet it is when he deals with the links between the radical wing of Liberalism and the new class-based Labour Party that Hamish Fraser's tale is at its most interesting and potentially most controversial. Tony Blair has infamously regretted Labour's split from Liberalism a hundred years ago, arguing that it led to the twentieth century being dominated by conservatism. This may or may not be good politics. It is certainly bad history. As described by Hamish Fraser, the historical context in which the split occurred made the split both inevitable and desirable. The Liberal Party at the turn of the twentieth century was entering upon a sea of internal troubles that would shipwreck any hopes that it could survive as the driving political force for radical change in the new century. Divided over home rule for Ireland, suspicious of both independent working class representation and of trade unionism, and completely out of touch with the coming ideas of socialism that would dominate the new century, it virtually imploded and became the also-rans of twentieth century electoral politics.

Its powerful radical wing may have sensed what was coming and did develop its own programme of reform, including an eight-hour day for miners, abolition of the House of Lords, home rule all round, land reform and adult suffrage. There was even an attempt to create a 'New Liberalism' which echoes the New Labour project of our own times. Yet its programme could never match the radicalism of the young Labour Party, it failed to break decisively with the whiggish elements that continued to dominate its constituency associations and it remained trapped within the framework of the two big establishment parties that stood in the way of further progressive

change. Liberalism was incapable of rising to the challenge of the new century. History and the twentieth century were very much on the side of the new Labour Party.

It seems to me that those such as Tony Blair who seek to regroup the forces of Liberalism at the turn of our new century make the mistake of trying to step outside of the historical process. In real history, you cannot go backwards, only forwards. To argue that class-based politics and the fight for socialism was a damaging and regrettable diversion ultimately destructive of progressive political advance is really to wish the twentieth century away.

Radicalism and radical Liberalism turned into the class-based Labour Party because the realities of the twentieth century demanded that they do so. The class divisions inherent in capitalism always would have demanded the emergence of a class-based politics. So long as capitalism survives, they will always continue to do so.

Marx and Engels famously told us that all hitherto history is the history of class struggles. Nye Bevan echoed them when he wrote 'either poverty will use democracy to win the struggle against property, or property, in fear of poverty, will destroy democracy'. Perhaps unconsciously, Hamish Fraser provides the evidence to substantially confirm that Labour's socialist forefathers were and still are right.

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