

REVIEW: SCOTLAND RECLAIMED

Amanda Sloat

Murray Ritchie, 2000, **Scotland Reclaimed: The Inside Story of Scotland's First Democratic Parliamentary Election**, Edinburgh: Saltire Society, pb, £10.99, ISBN 0854110771, 244pp.

After the publication of books by BBC Scotland's Brian Taylor and **The Scotsman's** Alan Taylor, it only seemed a matter of time before **The Herald** contributed its own tome to the quickly expanding selection of books detailing the genesis of the Scottish Parliament. While I was sceptical when I began reading Murray Ritchie's **Scotland Reclaimed**, expecting another rehashing of historical events and themes, I was pleasantly surprised to find an insightful, humorous, and immensely readable book. Ritchie is currently **The Herald's** Scottish Political Editor. Following Labour's victory in 1997, editor Harry Reid recalled him from Brussels - where he was the paper's European Editor - to cover events in Scotland. The book is a diary of Ritchie's experiences from January to July 1999, covering the election campaign, the parliament's first meetings, and the Royal Opening.

The book begins with a review of Ritchie's five years in Brussels, and details his frustration with Scotland's under-representation in the European Union. It then summarises events preceding Labour's election, which he manages to keep to 15 pages and fills with humorous anecdotes. It concludes with a complete listing of the election results. The bulk of the book provides what Tom Devine describes in his foreword as 'the real story behind the headlines'. The reader realises that journalists know far more about events than they report in their limited newspaper columns. This book's strength is Ritchie's lively and colourful description of his knowledge about and role in Scotland's first general election. However, its potential weakness is a greater appeal to political anoraks who recognise the main figures caricatured than to the average voter who barely noticed them the first time around.

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For those who wish to relive those glory days again, Ritchie provides an entertaining review. He regales the reader with reminiscences of the SNP's 'Penny for Scotland' plan, frequently changing polls, and the media attacks on Sean Connery. He also recalls the prominence of the war in Kosovo, the murder of Jill Dando, and the Sarwar trial - reflecting how the campaign was nearly overshadowed by outside incidents. He also sheds new light on notable events through his description of phone calls from politicians and off-the-record briefings, as well as his portrayal of editorial decisions and journalistic scoops. These inside accounts give the voyeuristic reader a unique behind-the-scenes view of politics in action.

Scotland Reclaimed makes several points about the nature of politics and the media in modern Britain. One of the book's most striking themes is the symbiosis between politicians and journalists. The media need access to the politicians in order to obtain stories, which, for example, made Ritchie willing to pay the Liberal Democrats their requested £1300 for a ride on their electoral battlebus. Although questioning the principle of paying for access, Ritchie suggests that 'information is a commodity to be bought and sold like soap powder. ... After all we make our living from selling news. We don't give it away' (p. 74). But politicians also need journalists to sell their ideas. Ritchie describes how the SNP 'summons' journalists to a news conference about their 'Penny for Scotland' strategy, while two days later journalists 'are summoned' by the Chancellor et al for a rebuttal (pp. 56-57). This mutual dependence occasionally breaks down. The SNP become frustrated with negative media coverage, electing to take their message directly to their voters and publishing several issues of their own newspaper. Ritchie grows exasperated by Labour demands, and refuses to attend a press conference called to counteract SNP headlines: 'Sometimes it's good to know New Labour needs us more than we need it, but the day will come - it always does - when the party takes its revenge on reporters who offend it' (p. 71).

Political journalists apparently play another role in the lives of politicians, that of political consultant. One of the most humorous parts of the book is a recitation of phone calls to Ritchie following Salmond's criticism of NATO action in Kosovo. The Nationalists want to know how **The Herald** is treating Salmond's remarks. Two days later the Conservatives ask Ritchie how to respond to Salmond's comments, which is followed by a call from Salmond himself regarding Ritchie's assessment of public reaction. A few days later, a Labour spin-doctor asks Ritchie about the effect of Salmond's statement. Ritchie wryly concludes: 'I am beginning to think I might have a career as a policy advisor' (pp. 70-71).

Another obvious theme of the book is the might of the Labour electoral machine. This is highlighted by the party's refusal to place nearly £100,000 worth of advertising in **The Herald**, which they feared would publicly support the SNP. Ritchie wanted **The Herald** to take a stance on independence, reflecting the views of many Scots who support it; however, he did not advocate an endorsement of the SNP and his editor chose to maintain the paper's neutrality. The book contains numerous examples of Ritchie's frustration with Labour tactics, including press conferences to remove attention from other parties and the questionable use of civil servants in the campaign. He was particularly frustrated by Labour's criticism of his paper's lack of support: 'being objective or balanced is no longer enough with this government. You must be for them or you are classified as against them' (p. 88).

Despite his even-handed reporting of events, Ritchie's nationalist sympathies are apparent in his defense of civic nationalism and underlying support for the political underdog. His focus on the Labour-SNP battle means coverage of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats is virtually non-existent. While Labour supporters may dispute his criticism of the party's conduct, Ritchie's reactions often seem justified: his disdain is usually directed at behaviour and does not take the form of personal vendettas. He also appears genuinely hurt by his treatment at the hands of the Labour party, particularly its response to his article detailing the exclusion of the three minority members of the parliament from their preferred committees: 'After more than 40 years in journalism and lending editorial support to the creation of a Scottish Parliament, I am rather taken aback that one of its first acts is to denounce me and my newspaper' (p. 194).

The book concludes with a postscript written in February 2000. It highlights the highs (powerful committees, media and public interest), lows (Lobbygate, Dewar's scandal-prone advisors) and oddities (SNP-Tory battles for primacy in opposition, neglected media-starved Westminster MPs) of the parliament's first six months. Ritchie's reflections on the parliament's early days call into question the desired 'new politics' typified by openness and transparency. He describes one journalist who was warned not to wander through the new parliament building, while Ritchie himself was scolded for straying near the Presiding Officer's sacred chambers. The new government has not performed much better, as he recalls coalition talks being held behind closed doors marked 'no media access' and the limited information provided by Dewar's spin doctor in early post-Cabinet briefings.

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My academic work took me to many of the events that Ritchie describes - albeit without the benefit of a press pass. His description of events created a sense of nostalgia for the early days of 1999, when many occurrences assumed a historical importance and the feeling of anticipation was tangible. I interviewed Ritchie for my research in a pub, as he jokingly suggested we 'get away from his editor'. When I flipped the pages of his book to the day of our February meeting, I discovered - quite predictably - that the probing questions of an American student did not merit mention. In person I found him to be the 'grizzled abrasive hack' his editor describes in the book's preface. But despite a brusque exterior, his book conveys affection for the characters and events about which he writes; he is not a dispassionate scribbler shipped up from London to cover events north of the border, but a true Scot who believes in the issues he reports.

When I asked him what the new parliament needs to succeed, he said 'it must respect the expectations of the people. They have invested their faith and waited for this'. This, as the book's title makes clear, is Scotland's recovery of its parliament. He said many Scots are aware of the anger their ancestors felt in 1707 when their parliament was taken away, and explained that 'the root of the political excitement is that when it was lost 300 years ago they wanted it back'. The concluding sentence of his book suggests that Ritchie does not believe the excitement is over yet, as he predicts an eventual referendum in which Scots must decide 'whether they want their country to remain an integral part of the United Kingdom or to reclaim its independence.'

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