

REVIEW: THE SCOTTISH NATION

Daniel Mulhall

T.M. Devine (1999), **The Scottish Nation 1700-2000** London: Allen Lane, Hdbk. £25. ISBN 0-715-99351-0, 696pp.

The production of a general history is an important and challenging task. In his book, **A History of the English People in 1815**, the French historian, Élie Halévy, makes a strong case for the synthetic approach to history. According to this view, the generalist 'is better able to guard against excessive simplifications and to make us realise the complexity and variety of the strands which, woven together, compose the facts of history'. Tom Devine is an adept weaver of strands into a seamless, analytical narrative. His book contains separate chapters on urban and rural life, education, women, immigration and emigration.

On account of my position as Ireland's Consul General in Scotland, I am apt to make historical comparisons across the Irish Sea. There is much to muse about. Besides both having a complex relationship with their populous Anglo-Saxon neighbour, Scotland and Ireland are countries of similar size, population and geographical location, but, at least in the three centuries covered by **The Scottish Nation**, an apparently vastly different historical record.

The Scottish Nation bears comparison with two influential Irish books written in the late 1980s, R.F. Foster's **Modern Ireland: 1600-1972** and J.J. Lee's **Ireland 1912-1985**. Neither book could properly be called 'The Irish Nation' because, ironically, 'nation' is still a more loaded term in Ireland, a country boasting a sovereign State for almost 80 years, than in Scotland whose 'nation' is subsumed within a larger State. Foster's book has a longer time frame than Devine's, stretching from the defeat of Gaelic Ireland at the Battle of Kinsale to 1972 when Ireland decided to join the EEC. He challenges traditional nationalist views of Ireland's past, insisting that there is more to Irish history 'than the definition of Irishness against Britishness,' but

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is forced to acknowledge that 'the sense of difference comes strongly through'.

A similar statement could be made in the Scottish context, except that in this instance the rivalry, albeit a less acute one, is between Englishness and Scottishness, with Britishness providing an important element of binding. Contrasting responses to 'Britishness' in Scotland and Ireland, following the Acts of Union of 1707 and 1801, sets the two nations apart for much of their subsequent historical journeys. While the 'revisionist' view of Irish history has stemmed from contemporary concerns related to the conflict in Northern Ireland, Tom Devine also acknowledges a current rationale behind his work. At a time of constitutional change, he seeks to understand the forces that shaped the identity and culture of the Scottish nation. Foster's generation of Irish scholars felt a need to challenge a powerful, if inadequately elaborated, historiographical legacy. In the Scottish case, the battle for a separate Scottish 'national' history is, I suppose, in some senses still being waged, although **The Scottish Nation** could be considered something of a clinching argument.

Professor Devine insists that it is necessary to view Scotland against 'a comparative framework of reference' and he makes repeated use of Ireland in this connection. J.J. Lee's inspiring book, **Ireland 1912-1985**, seeks to avoid the pitfall of viewing Ireland's history in splendid isolation, or solely in terms of 'the national question'. With its concentration on economic development issues, his work departs from the obsessive introspection that has sometimes characterised the debate about Ireland's past. In an attempt to fathom independent Ireland's economic frailty, he drew comparisons with such small European States as Denmark, Finland, Switzerland and Norway. His argument was that in 1921 Ireland had been 'a reasonably representative western European economy' but had subsequently fallen 'far below the western European average.'

As comparable European economies made steady strides during the first three-quarters of the 20th century, Irish performance, North and South alike, was stuck at the bottom of the league table for economic growth. In the 20th century, the UK was also a poor economic performer by European standards. Devine acknowledges this, but observes that Scotland was doing even less well. With Scotland's manufacturing sector declining by 30% between 1976 and 1987, it seems likely that, had **The Scottish Nation** been written a decade ago, its perspective might not have been very different from Joe Lee's dismal picture of Ireland's economic frailty. **Ireland 1912-1985** represented something of a wake-up call for an underachieving Ireland and, in the years since its publication (1989), the Irish economy has transformed itself and become a market leader amongst comparable nations. In the light of the

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1990s, a history of Ireland's 20th century would now have to be written from a vastly different vantage point. The question is whether the advent of economic prosperity and the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement ought to be viewed as a decisive break with the past. In the Scottish case, the same question could be asked about devolution and the impact of new economic trends (in high technology industry and financial services) not dissimilar to those that have transformed Ireland's fortunes in recent times. Are we looking at a genuinely 'new' Ireland and a 'new' Scotland at the dawn of the 21st century or will past political and economic patterns eventually reassert themselves?

The Scottish Nation chronicles Scotland's rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, coupled with, by Irish standards, a habit of apparent political quiescence. For me, a key comparative puzzle is how Scotland managed to benefit from the industrial revolution while Ireland, with the exception of the Ulster counties of Antrim and Down, missed out on this transforming experience. Professor Devine is at his most compelling when analysing the dazzling economic success story between 1750 and 1850, which transformed Scotland from one of Europe's poorest societies into one of its richest. He views the pace of urbanisation and industrialisation as genuinely revolutionary.

Ireland's failure to match Scotland's rapid industrialisation leads Devine to conclude that this process was not inevitable, but the product of interlocking factors peculiar to the Scottish case. Capital, labour, technology and enterprise are all seen as factors, but the most persuasive seems to me to be the existence of a land frontier with England, the richest European economy of the 18th century and the cradle of the industrial revolution. This geographical factor unique to Scotland goes a long way towards explaining why the Union for the most part suited Scotland while it discommoded the majority of Irish people persistently enough to sustain a tradition of nationalist dissent throughout the 19th century and into the 20th. Roy Foster explains Ulster's 18th century industrialisation as a function of its farmers' embrace of cottage industry at an early stage, but acknowledges that interaction with a rapidly industrialising Scotland aided Ulster's development. This industrial success ensured that the Irish/British Act of Union was seen there as an ingredient of prosperity whereas nationalist Ireland blamed the Union for its economic ruin.

It is worth dwelling on contrasting Irish and Scottish reactions to their respective Unions with England. After all, when its Union came about, Scotland had a longer history of independence than Ireland had when its Parliament was abolished in 1801. Yet, in the Scottish case, the challenge to

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the Williamite settlement was essentially a dynastic one. Once the Jacobite cause petered out in the mid-18th century, Scots by and large settled down to enjoy the commercial fruits of participation in an increasingly successful British State. In Ireland's case, once Catholic emancipation failed to accompany the Union, whatever prospect there was of Ireland being smoothly integrated into a British State quickly evaporated.

These conflicting patterns seem to me to stem from the different historical contexts of the two Unions. Whereas the Scottish/English Union represented an attempt to buttress the 'revolution' of 1688, the Irish/British Union of 1801 came forth against the background of European revolutionary upheavals culminating in the United Irishmen's rising of 1798. Moreover, initial Scottish and Irish challenges to the Union came from contrasting quarters. In the Scottish case, while the Jacobite risings no doubt encompassed a degree of disenchantment with the Union, their prime motive was to restore the old order pre-1688. This was why they ultimately failed. Even if the incidental impact of a triumph of Jacobitism might have been to sunder the Union of 1707, its basic aim was to restore the old Union of crowns under a more traditional ruling system. By contrast, Robert Emmet's Irish rising of 1803 amounted to a brief but prophetic recrudescence of radical revolutionary sentiment, an exercise in, to use W.B. Yeats's words, hurling 'the little streets upon the great'.

In Ireland, where the Gaelic aristocracy had been vanquished long before the Union, there was no mystique of lost dynasty aching to be restored. Subsequent Irish political movements - Daniel O'Connell's popular crusade for Catholic emancipation and repeal of the Union, the Young Ireland rebellion of 1848 and the Home Rule movement - tapped into the modernising movements of liberalism, romantic nationalism and parliamentary democracy rather than appealing for the restoration of an old order. If an 18th century Scottish chronology were to be superimposed on Ireland after 1801, the Battle of Culloden would coincide with the outbreak of the Great Famine. Whereas the legacy of Culloden was to solidify the Union of 1707, one vital result of the Famine was to doom the Irish/British Union in the Irish nationalist mind. Queen Victoria, during whose reign Scotland scaled the heights of economic success, was a regular visitor to the Highlands. She travelled to Ireland just three times during her long reign; her last visit was in 1900 when nationalists were still apt to condemn her as 'the Famine Queen'.

If history is shaped by forces that cross national boundaries, where is Scotland's equivalent of Ireland's 1798 rebellion, its romantic revolt of 1848, its Fenian movement, its land war, its cultural revival and struggle for

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freedom from Imperial control? **The Scottish Nation** reveals that Scotland was indeed affected by many of the forces that shaped Irish history. However, it reacted differently to them. There was a radical decade in the 1790s, but the set of circumstances that pushed the United Irishmen into open revolt did not manifest themselves in a country already being shaped by the agricultural and industrial revolutions of the late-18th century.

Devine points out that Scotland had its romantic movement which expressed itself in the creation of a Highland identity that distinguished Scotland from England without generating separatist demands. The Scottish Highlands had their 19th century famine and land war, but these never matched their Irish counterparts in intensity or political impact. The Scottish/English Union was able to accommodate a Scottish 'nation' which, despite its lack of a Parliament, still looked after its own legal, educational and religious affairs while profiting from the British Imperial adventure. Whereas 'the Irish question' is a staple theme in 19th century history, Devine's chapter on 'The Scottish Question' kicks off with Winnie Ewing's victory for the SNP in the Hamilton by-election in November 1967.

Although the historical log of Irish-Scottish interaction is replete with evidence of two-way influences - St. Columba, Dal Riada, the Lordship of the Isles, the Plantation of Ulster, the impact of the Scottish Enlightenment on the United Irishmen, and the nineteenth century flow of Irish emigrants into Scotland's expanding industrial centres - Irish historians have made little use of Scotland as an external reference point against which to size up the Irish situation. Understandably, they have been preoccupied with the seeming uniqueness of the Irish national story and concentrate on exploring its most heavyweight chapter, 'Anglo-Irish' relations. Until recent times, in Ireland we had a habit of seeing Britain through a Whitehall/Westminster lens, leaving Scotland out of the picture altogether. One of the ramifications of devolution has been to bring Scotland to mind once again. This re-emergence, of which the appearance of **The Scottish Nation** is a reflection, offers scope for a welcome diversification of relations between Ireland and a devolved Britain.

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