

## **REVIEW: UNDERSTANDING SCOTLAND: THE STATE OF THE NATION 1707-1830**

*Richard Finlay*

Neil Davidson, **The Origins of Scottish Nationhood**, London, Pluto Press, 2000, vii + 264pp, ISBN 0745316085, £14.99; Christopher A. Whatley, **Scottish Society 1707-1830: Beyond Jacobitism, towards industrialization**, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, xiii + 354pp, ISBN 0719045401, £14.99.

The historians of Scotland, who for decades have ploughed a lonely furrow in what seemed a barren field, motivated by a faith that their subject was worthy, while their colleagues regarded their tracts as little more than glorified meandering in local history, may be permitted a rueful smile to themselves. After all, with the creation of a parliament in Edinburgh, have we not witnessed the triumph of Scottish history? Yet, triumphalism can be a perilous thing. British history seems to have been stopped in its track by a Scottish national sentiment that demands a cultural and historical reappraisal which stresses the continuity of Scottish national identity. While no one would deny the importance of the British connection in Scottish history, recent political change, it would seem, has led to its devaluation. Even if devolution stops short of independence, the nature of Britishness and the British state has changed to one that permits a greater degree of heterogeneity, and given that the present is largely reflected into the past, it goes without saying that the Scottish profile will be increased. Certainly Scottish history is all the rage at the moment. In contrast to England, which has witnessed a partial crisis of confidence in the subject (according to **History Today**), there is seemingly no end in sight to the Scottish historical onslaught. Celebrities try their hand at recounting the Scottish past, aided and abetted by publishers aware that there is a vast untapped historical market out there, **Scotland's Story**, a popular magazine, topped regular sales of 40,000 per week, a TV series was screened last February and all of this is supplemented with a steady production line of academic tomes.

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Inevitably, much of this is infused with a small 'n' nationalist tone and chimes in with the popular mood of a celebration of Scottishness. Who needs British history when we have our own? Naturally, there has been a diminution in the British aspect of history in Scotland as the subject is reassessed. While it may be stated that the vision of a homogeneous Britishness has failed to achieve its historic destiny, there can be no denying that the Union with England, for good or bad, was a central feature over the last three hundred years. While it may be fashionable to question its relevance today, it should not contaminate our perception of the past. There is a real danger that we throw out the Unionist baby with the British bath water.

If for no other reason than to provide a cautionary note to a triumphalist reading of Scottish history, the books by Whatley and Davidson are to be welcomed. Of the two, Davidson's is the most contentious and the most likely to attract opprobrium. His thesis, put simply, is that Scottish nationhood is a post-Union construct and therefore Scottish national identity, as we understand it, owes its existence to Britain. Davidson's argument is constructed on the basis of a Marxist reading of Scottish and British history and his scholarship and interpretation, according to Marxist dictates, is exemplary. While many may be tempted to dismiss this book out of hand on account of its ideological pedigree, it is worth remembering that much of our current historical understanding is based on Marxist-type readings of history, although not all of them have Davidson's Stakanovite rigour. The biggest conceptual difficulty with Davidson's argument is his trammeling into ideological molds of notions of national consciousness, nationalism and the definition of a nation state. Central to Davidson's proposition is that each of these factors are separate and different from one another. In short, national consciousness is not the same as nationalism as each are conditioned by specific historical circumstances. The idea of Scotland as a nation - Scottish nationhood- it is argued, emerges at the same point in history as the emergence of British nationhood. The two are tied together and are part of the same process. Yet, here we get to the hub of the difficulties with Davidson's interpretation. Firstly, its intellectual construction is maintained by the mechanistic principles which are set out in the first two chapters outlining the theoretical and methodological approach to the study. For the rest of the book to make sense, it is necessary to agree with what is said in those pages. Most will not. Secondly, the use of such rigid definitions forces Davidson to the conclusion that Scotland was not a nation before 1707, although he concedes that there are elements of proto nationalism and proto national consciousness. Admittedly, Scotland is not a nation in the sense that Davidson defines a nation: at this time there is only one, England. Yet, this

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stands in contradistinction to the ideas of most historians inside and outside of Scotland who would argue that the Scots had most of the necessary features to qualify as a nation state in the period before 1707 and certainly before 1603. To argue otherwise is to fly in the face of, for want of a better expression, common sense. Also, it displays some of the worse aspects of that now thankfully redundant historiography in which Scottish historical development was held up to the benchmark of England and found wanting (Kidd 1993). Comparisons with Continental Europe would have cast Scotland in a more normal light but this would wreck the thesis.

Another old bogey, the Highland-Lowland divide, is brought in to further back up the proposition that Scottish national consciousness was only partially formed by 1707 and that this divide was an impediment to the full development of nationhood. It took the subjugation of the Highlands following the Jacobite Rebellion and the opportunities afforded by British imperial expansion in the eighteenth century to rehabilitate the noble Highland warrior and create the uniform notion of Scottish nationhood as part of British nationhood. Central in this process is the role of the Scottish bourgeoisie who manufactured and promoted not only a sense of Scottish identity but a North British identity. There are a large number of assumptions in this thesis. Firstly, how significant was the Highland/Lowland divide? The existence of states or nations which have an ambiguous core-periphery relationship or a multicultural dimension is not unusual in Europe. Furthermore, why should it be that Scotland cannot be a nation because of these problems of core-periphery when Britain can, when in fact it can be said the problems of core-periphery were actually greater in Britain than they ever were in Scotland? Indeed, Davidson loses track of his thesis in postulating these chapters. His argument that Scottish and British identity were shaped by the impact of British imperial expansion displays the same have-the-cake-and-eat-it attitude as the chapters on the Highlands. For one, Davidson cites those given to the promotion of British imperialism in Scotland and uses them as evidence that the sentiment of Scottish/British imperialism was making a big impact. There is little or no evidence for such an assertion in the eighteenth century. One of the texts that receives a lengthy analysis is Robert Knox's **History of the British Empire**, but this was more of an ideal than a reality. Secondly, the citation of texts and letters is not the same as saying that they had a widespread influence on society. Indeed, some of the keenest proponents of the imperial connection were the landed class, hardly evidence of a popular British identity. Also, while Davidson stresses the centrality of the bourgeoisie to the development of identity, we are never

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quite sure of who the bourgeoisie are. A homogeneity is imposed that never existed in the past.

Davidson concludes his analysis with the impact of the French Revolution and the crisis which affected society in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. Again the analysis becomes rather woolly and burdened with an abundance of statistics which helps to mask the main thrust of his argument that the Scottish working-class were identifying with a British political agenda in that redress of their grievances would only come about by reform of the British political system which could only be achieved if the British working-class pulled together. Evidence of this sense of Britishness is demonstrated by showing the culture of the working-class was fusing different English and Scottish traditions. What this shows is that national identity is re-invented in response to particular historical circumstances, but then so what? It has always been reinvented and was doing so before this period, and what is more was re-invented after this period. What is most contentious about Davidson's interpretation is the assertion that Scottish and British identity was being conditioned by the British state, such as through the auspices of imperial expansion, even though the East India Company was largely beyond state control. Also, his argument that the British working class was mobilized in opposition to the British state sits awkwardly with this thesis.

A final difficulty with the Davidson thesis is the argument that the reinvention of Scotland in the guise of tartanry and Highlandism à la Walter Scott was a method to diffuse radical sentiment. While it is beyond question that this particular brand of Scottish identity was a reaction to the forces of modernism and heavily inclined towards Toryism, it ignores the other aspects of Scottish identity in the mid-nineteenth century associated with the radical laissez-faire liberalism of the middle-class, which stood in stark opposition to the landed elite. The cavalier dismissal of the idea of Scottish civil society and the idea of Unionist nationalism (Morton 1999) has more to do with the removal of an awkward piece of evidence which can not be fitted into a model of Scottish bourgeois homogeneity. It is here that we get to the crux of the problem with Davidson's argument. It may be correct to state that there was no collective notion of the Scottish nation before 1707, but, going on his own criteria, is Davidson correct to assert that there was after 1820? Were the divisions between landed, middle and working class Scotland after 1820 not more significant than the divisions between the Highlands and the Lowlands before 1707? How can you have a multi-national British nation but not a multi-cultural Scottish nation? Finally, Davidson's ideological blinkers present any real intellectual engagement with the power of perception. While it is possible to demonstrate, to his credit, the difficulties associated with the

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idea of Scottish nationhood in the period between 1746 and 1820, these do not really matter if most Scots perceive themselves to be Scottish and conjecture imaginary lines of continuity in their history. Furthermore, given that most of the evidence he cites for the British Scottish identity comes from the elite of society, can this be taken as an accurate barometer of what most Scots believed? For a Marxist history, it is remarkably unconcerned with the voice of the proletariat.

That said, Davidson has presented Scottish historians with an interesting challenge; namely the construction of an intellectual framework which accommodates Scottish history to British history and stresses the fundamental inter-connectedness between the two. While Davidson's overall thesis is problematic, it does raise important issues which have been relatively neglected in Scottish history of late. The development of capital and class are central to the Scottish historical experience in this period and Davidson is absolutely right to place them centre stage. His bold endeavour to offer a conceptual framework is something that Scottish historians should engage with and not ignore, although Scottish history is a subject which is not exactly renowned for its love of theoretically informed discussion. The problems highlighted by Davidson, such as the Highland-Lowland divide, the Scottish role in eighteenth century imperialism and the infusion of British class consciousness are important issues which have to be addressed. Finally, Davidson is to be congratulated for taking to task a number of historians who were somewhat cavalier in their assertions about Scottish national identity. As a taskmaster demanding the most rigorous of intellectual standards, Davidson is one of the best critics the Scottish historical profession has.

A less dogmatic position is taken by Chris Whatley in his analysis of Scottish society, and again those who are triumphant on the current state of Scottish historiography may wish to reflect why it has taken until now to find a worthy replacement for Chris Smout's **History of the Scottish People** which was written nearly thirty years ago. Although much of Smout's pathbreaking study has been replaced by subsequent research, it has been done in a piecemeal sort of fashion (Devine and Mitchison 1988, Devine and Young 1999; Devine 1994) and Whatley's effort is the only extant overview of this period written by a single author. In contrast to some recent endeavours to locate the transformation of Scottish society in this period within the dynamics of that society itself, Whatley places the Union centre stage. In some respects it is a return to the historiography of the 1960s which sought to explain the economic development of Scotland in the eighteenth century with reference to the benefits of the political Union in 1707 (Campbell 1985, Smout 1969). Yet Whatley's analysis is of a different hue and of a much more complex

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order. By paying close attention to the activities of the British state in terms of the economic impetus offered by organizations such as the Society for Manufactures and Fisheries, Whatley posits compelling new lines of argument which are based on original research. Firstly, the hoary old chestnut of Jacobitism recedes into the background as the violent nature of Scottish society, especially the introduction of the Malt Tax in 1725 which sparked of prolonged rioting, emerges as the principal concern of early eighteenth century politicians. Economic amelioration emerges as a key and consistent theme in the endeavours of the government to hold together the new British state. Whatley not only demonstrates the success the Scots had in screwing out concessions from Westminster but also takes issue with the current historiography in his assessment of its importance to economic development, especially in the period before 1740. Although there will inevitably be some quibbling on the extent to which the Union affected the Scottish economy in the first half of the eighteenth century, the idea that it had no impact at all has effectively been scotched. Capital and technology transfer are examined, together with the safety afforded by access to the market of the British fiscal military state to paint a picture in which, notwithstanding recent research stressing Scottish enterprise, the Union looms large, indeed, central.

Undoubtedly this will raise nationalist hackles, and Whatley has been unfairly pilloried in the past for promoting a 'unionist' version of Scottish history. Nothing could be further from the truth. It may not chime in with the 'feelgood' factor prevalent in Scottish history at the moment, but Whatley, as a professional historian, has no other option but to tell it as it was. And it should be said at the outset that this book is based on scholarship, and any careful reading reveals no political axe to grind whatsoever. Those who claim otherwise are reading things into the book that do not exist. Interestingly, Whatley's analysis of the relationship between the Scottish elite and the British state closely resembles that of Lindsay Paterson, the political scientist, in that both stress the large amount of autonomy that existed in the government of Scotland and that the development of the Union was conditioned by dialogue and debate on both sides throughout the eighteenth century (Paterson 1994). Again, it will be a measure of the maturity of the study of Scottish history when the issue of the Union no longer conditions knee-jerk responses. Whatley has put it back at the centre of Scottish history and the important thing to be emphasized here is that the Union was a process, not just an event, and that process is central to our understanding of modern Scotland. It can not be wished away and if we wish to have a proper appreciation of our past, nor should it be.

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The second major theme that emerges from Whatley's study is that the conventional notion of the Scots as an 'uninflammable people', immune from social protest, is not valid. The book paints a detailed portrait of the social upheaval caused by economic transformation, and the Scots were anything but passive observers. His starting point is the commonsense one that if similar upheavals elsewhere caused protest why should Scotland be different? It is irrefutable logic and Whatley has started to unearth the evidence which will set a precedent for other scholars to follow. Part of the reason that the 'sleepy Scotland' thesis has held sway for so long has been the difficulty in finding the evidence within the records of the legal labyrinth and the all too common assumption that the elaborate mechanisms of power in Scotland were as effective as they themselves claimed. In spite of the 'orthodoxy of passivity' there was an awful lot of rioting going on in eighteenth century Scotland, many such as the Shawfield, Porteous, Militia and foods riots well known to historians. Whatley has supplemented these with less well known riots, and taken together with the rumbustious nature of popular celebrations, has come to the sensible conclusion that the Scottish mob was not particularly deferential. Indeed, some of the mechanisms of Scottish society which were thought to promote social harmony, such as the role of the sheriffs in adjudicating on wage settlements and prices and the social discipline of the Kirk, are in fact testament to the power of the Scottish mob. As with the Union, Whatley places the social upheaval of economic transformation, and, more importantly, the popular reaction to it, right at the centre of Scottish history in the second half of the eighteenth century.

It is informative to set Whatley's account of the triumph of bourgeois Scotland against Davidson. Whereas the latter tends to depict capital as homogeneous, Whatley portrays it in all its various shades and guises. Indeed, Whatley demonstrates how Scotland fitted in with the fiscal military state of the eighteenth century and how it transformed itself into the laissez faire state of the nineteenth. Strangely, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries remain massively understudied in Scotland, even though this was one of the most crucial turning points in its history. Rightly, class is the central theme of Whatley's study in this period which he sees as the making and breaking of the working-class, but also the formation of the united propertied class. Again the picture that emerges is one of a turbulent society with political discontent compounded by the consequences of rapid economic and social change, all of which were exacerbated by the effect of the Napoleonic wars and the depression that followed in their wake. Whatley's treatment of working-class discontent is sympathetic, but balanced, and he is careful to point out the effect of Loyalism and patriotism as a means of

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diffusing radical sympathies. He is also meticulous in recounting the efficiency of the propertied class in protecting their own interests. The landed elite and the aspiring bourgeoisie put their squabbling behind them to concentrate on maintaining the rights of property in the face of a massive onslaught of working-class discontent. It is easy to forget that the laissez-faire liberalism of civic Scottish society in the nineteenth century was not the result of a natural evolution and common sense, but was the product of a bitter class conflict hammered out in the anvil of revolutionary times.

The third theme which emerges is that the Scotland of 1707 to 1830 was one of common men and women. Whatley sensibly does not shove women into a ghetto chapter of their own but, in so far as is possible with the documentary evidence, places them centre stage with men. Scottish women work and play like their menfolk. One interesting feature of Whatley's gender neutral approach is that the lives of Scottish men and women were remarkably similar throughout this period. His graphic descriptions of the back-breaking physical work that powered the industrial revolution are just as likely to concern women and children as men. Whereas recent historiography of the eighteenth century has tended to focus on the remarkable intellectual outpouring of the Scottish Enlightenment, it finds little resonance in this study, except when of course such strictures, especially those concerning improvement and economy, are applied in reality. While this will no doubt attract criticism in some quarters, it does help to redress the balance, and few reading Whatley would be left in any doubt that the Scotland of the eighteenth century was as far as possible from being the Enlightened society that the literati liked to portray. Indeed, what comes out of this study is the otherworldliness of the Enlightenment and its remoteness from the day to day lives of most Scots. That other buzz word of history at the moment - identity - is also missing. And again, it is not surprising to see why. Given the enormity of changes that were going on and the life of constant struggle, the identity of the common folk of Scotland is there for those who wish to deconstruct Whatley's voices, but they do not fit in with the neat parameters of nationality, religion, gender and locality so beloved of academic categorizers. Left to speak for themselves they have an eloquence that needs no enhancements. Finally the voice of the ordinary Scot can be heard and T.C. Smout's **History of the Scottish People** has a worthy successor.

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