

REVIEW: L'ECOSSE; VIEILLE NATION, JEUNE ETAT

Michael Russell

Jacques Leruez, **L'Ecosse; Vieille Nation, Jeune Etat**, Crozon: Editions Armeline, 2000, 150 FF.

Jacques Leruez is a distinguished scholar of British, and especially Scottish, political life and his sympathies with Scotland and our constitutional progress are given form in his dedicated presidency of L'Association Franco-Ecossaise, a position he has held since 1997.

L'Ecosse; Vieille Nation, Jeune Etat is an updated and revised edition of his 1983 study of Scottish politics, **L'Ecosse; une nation sans Etat**. The contrast between the two titles reflects the progress that Scotland has made in 17 years for, having been a nation without statehood, we have now, according to M. Leruez, achieved a form of national political existence and may be in the process of moving that forward.

Practising politicians tend to rely on memory, anecdote and spin in assessing the progress of their cause. It is therefore good to step back from the political chalk face from time to time and see politics as academics see it, particularly academics so steeped in information as M. Leruez.

For M. Leruez is nothing if not thorough. I know of no comparable volume in English that lists the Secretaries of State from 1900 (and the junior ministers from 1974), gives the party percentages for every general election since the Second World War, provides figures for the number of civil servants at various stages of our democratic development, contains a table of founding dates and editorial sympathies of all the main Scottish newspapers and still manages to explain concisely and accurately the sometimes Byzantine

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internal structures of the SNP. In addition, M. Leruez understands better than most Scots the legislative procedures of the Scottish Parliament and has kept up to date with the twists and turns not just of devolution but also of public perception of our new democratic institutions.

The sheer breadth of issues covered in **L'Ecosse; Vieille Nation, Jeune Etat** is just as daunting as the constant procession of statistics. The three sections of the book start with a general review of the origin of the 'Scottish Question' which takes as its starting point the wars of independence. M. Leruez then examines in sequence the particular nature of Scottish society, the national question from 1967 (again prefaced by some background information) and what he calls the 'March to devolution' between 1980 and 1999.

M. Leruez regards the 'national question' as having been the dominant issue in Scotland's history. I suspect that such an assertion is true, but it runs counter to a great deal of contemporary scholarship, and to the point of view of most historians from our past. Scotland has been – and often still is – seen from within Scotland as having much more pressing issues for study and concern, a position replicated today in the voluble criticism from New Labour whenever the SNP brings issues of national identity or national consciousness to debate in the Parliament.

M. Leruez therefore does Scotland a service by reminding us that the 'national question' remains unsolved, although it is perhaps nearer to solution than ever before. As a nationalist I believe that solution to lie in sovereign independence within structures such as the European Union, and although M. Leruez warmly endorses, from a European perspective, the positive nature of engagement with Europe advocated by the SNP he is less certain than I am of its outcome.

Despite his strongly nationalist perspective on the political re-growth of Scotland (and despite his very perceptive observations on the strains within Labour which the existence of a Scottish Parliament has produced), M. Leruez is sufficiently concerned with the growth of Euro scepticism to suggest that the SNP's advocacy of independent membership of Europe may be less useful to the party and the nation than Plaid Cymru's aspiration to be part of a Europe of the regions. He also sees in present Scottish political trends a possibility that the SNP may take power in 2003 but that thereafter it may have to administer the devolved structures without being able to move

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on directly to independence, though the comparison he cites is Quebec and not Catalonia, which at least indicates an intention to keep trying.

In this analysis M. Leruez gives too little weight to the dynamic and the history of the SNP. Whilst in reality the SNP has virtually never taken a stance of 'independence, nothing less', its pragmatic agreement to campaign for and participate in devolution at its National Council in 1997 was founded upon its clear and continuing aim of full national sovereignty. The dispute between gradualism and fundamentalism may have been a strong factor in the factionalism of the late 1980s and early 1990s but, post devolution, all SNP members are now both gradualist and fundamentalist and what little factionalism may still exist is a mere matter of personalities, not policies.

Working within the Scottish Parliament, SNP members are helping to build a stronger and stronger case for more powers, a fact confirmed by recent polls on fiscal autonomy. But at the same time they have a duty to remind Scots that the Parliament is incomplete in many ways and that completing the powers of the Parliament remains unfinished business.

The SNP in government from 2003 would and could be no different in attitude on this matter than the in opposition today. Indeed, an approach to government that sought to impose neutrality in the matter of the constitution would be as foolish as the idea was when proposed as policy for the SNP in the early 1980s. A nationalist party cannot be neutral on the issue of national independence, and in governing well within the institutions of devolution the party would have to move the issue on. The construction of policy intentions for the Westminster elections in 2001 proves the point – all of them are capable of some implementation without independence, but all of them require independence in order to be fully realised and their benefit fully felt.

L'Ecosse; Vieille Nation, Jeune Etat is a book full of useful analysis backed up by a legion of facts and figures. M. Leruez keeps himself remarkably well informed about the minutiae of Scottish politics (the book even contains a reference to the departure of John Rafferty as Donald Dewar's Chief of Staff in December 1999) but the business is a fast-moving one, and a text finished in April 2000 is already three administrations and four party leaders out of date.

Those recent changes have been of profound significance but they are unlikely to alter the long-term outcome of Scotland's constitutional journey. M. Leruez believes that the United Kingdom will not survive in its present form, and I do not believe I am wrong in reading into his text not just his

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academic conclusion that this ancient nation is beginning to assert itself as a young state, but also his personal hope that we may yet be able to go further. It is a hope that he and I share.

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