

REVIEW: UNDERSTANDING SCOTLAND

Steve Bruce

David McCrone, **Understanding Scotland: the sociology of a nation – second edition**, London: Routledge 2001, 216 pp, ISBN 0415 25164 8 (pbk), 0415 25163 X (hbk), £16.99.

The expansion of sociology in the new British universities of the early 1960s inadvertently created an exemplar of one of the mistakes of mid-twentieth century social science. That mistake was the belief that modernisation was an essentially unitary process and that all societies would gradually converge. Hence what was written about one modern society could sensibly illuminate any other. The inadvertent exemplification came from the lag in producing 'indigenous' social science materials. The British sociology text book market of the 1960s was dominated by American products. A student of urban sociology could learn a great deal about the development of inner Chicago and very little about any British city. The huge growth in the undergraduate market allowed publishers to produce British texts but, in the way of these things, British actually meant English. So we had car workers in Luton (not Linwood) and families in Bethnal Green (not East Kilbride) and race relations in Birmingham (not Woodlands).

It is not necessarily chauvinistic to regret this emphasis. For many of us in the trade, the great appeal of sociology is its potential for having students reflect critically upon their own lives and circumstances. This is hardly helped by having very few teaching materials that explore classic sociological problems and themes through places and cases that are familiar.

But a degree of chauvinism does seem proper. It is presumably in the interest of Scots to have a vibrant academy. Devolved government supports a large number of research social scientists but the academy will be distorted so long as ambitious social scientists in Scotland are not encouraged to see Scotland as a perfectly sensible place in which to study general social phenomena.

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Scottish Affairs

Given that postgraduate research often follows on from undergraduate work, we have an obvious interest in encouraging undergraduates to study Scotland, both for what is distinctive about it and for what it has in common with other societies.

It is for these reasons that we should not only welcome but celebrate this second edition of David McCrone's **Understanding Scotland**. But first, in the Oscar tradition, a few other people should be thanked. First, credit is due to John Urry of Lancaster University, the editor of the Routledge series, who first commissioned McCrone's book in the International Library of Sociology series. Second, we should thank Routledge for not saying, as many other publishers have done, that sales would not merit a Scottish book. That the first edition was reprinted three times shows how that confidence was repaid.

But most of all we should thank McCrone for producing a sociology of Scotland, and such a good one. Those who are familiar with the first edition do not need told that it was remarkable in the extent to which it conveyed a great deal of detailed information in a thoroughly accessible style. It was also persuasive in the places where it argued that Scots had exaggerated or fabricated their particularities; for example, he showed that, for all the Scots' fondness for thinking of themselves as (in comparison with the English) unusually egalitarian, patterns of social mobility in Scotland were much the same as in England. Contra the Marxist-Nationalist view that Scotland had been oppressed as an 'internal colony', he showed that the distribution of social class and types of occupation in Scotland was closer to the English 'norm' than were many regions of England. Particularly level-headed was the discussion of Scottish culture and its relationship to national identity: an area otherwise characterised by much hysteria.

How does the new version compare? These are small points but it is worth saying that it looks and feels much better. The publishers have used a slightly smaller but more attractive font and higher quality paper. The volume is slimmer and has a very attractive cover design.

One small but significant presentational change is that the original sub-title 'the sociology of a stateless nation' has become 'the sociology of a nation': recognition of the huge political change since 1997. As the first edition made clear, Scotland has long enjoyed far greater administrative autonomy within the UK than was often realised. The creation (or, if you are a romantic, the restoration) of the Parliament has added a representative element to make Scotland a state for most practical purposes.

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The new edition is able to call on a considerable body of recent research (most of it done by McCrone and his colleagues at Edinburgh) on the sources of national identity, and particularly the role of culture. The insights of **Scotland the Brand** (David McCrone, Angela Morris and Richard Kiely, Edinburgh University Press, 1995) have been integrated, as has a considerable body of social statistics produced by the Scottish Election and Scottish Social Attitudes surveys. But this material is well-digested and will not scare off the statophobe.

The only weakness of the first edition (and this reflected the novelty of the project rather than any failing of the author) was that its reliance on the work of other disciplines (such as economics, psephology, media studies, history, literary criticism and philosophy) gave it a somewhat lumpy texture. McCrone's work in the intervening decade gives this new edition a much smoother feel and this is very much evident in the new opening chapter. It offers a sociological history of Scotland in the twentieth century that focuses on, 'consecutively, the market, the state and the nation ... as in a piece of music, they are interconnected themes' (p. 3).

The other place in which McCrone's magisterial grasp of his material is clear is in the new discussion of national identity. For McCrone:

Identity is not a 'thing' which can be treated as real and unreal, but a social space in which matters of structure and culture come together. What it means to be 'Scottish' is far less important for the answers than for the terms in which the debate occurs. Identity politics, then, becomes a sphere in which history, society and culture interact. It is a debate about different versions of being Scottish, which seek to mobilise process and iconography.
(p. 3)

It is much easier to be locally celebrated if one is an historian. Historians are expected to study one place. Scotland is rightly proud of Smout and Devine and rewards them with prizes and honours. David McCrone is every bit as much a national treasure. His personal modesty keeps him out of the limelight but those of us with an interest in promoting the social sciences in Scotland and in promoting the social scientific study of Scotland know just how much we rely on his work and how much he has done to encourage other scholars. The first edition of **Understanding Scotland** was excellent. This is even better.

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