

REVIEW: THE CHALLENGE TO WESTMINSTER AND SCOTTISH POLITICS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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- H. T. Dickinson and Michael Lynch (eds.) (2000), **The Challenge to Westminster: Sovereignty, Devolution and Independence**, East Linton, Scotland: Tuckwell, Pb. £9.99, ISBN: 1-86323-152-3, 174pp.
- I. G. C. Hutchinson (2001), **Scottish Politics in the Twentieth Century**, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave. Pb. £14.50, ISBN: 0-333-58875-4, 190pp.

The general florescence of Scottish history continues apace with these two new volumes, both of which make useful contributions to our understanding of Scotland. **The Challenge to Westminster** is a conference-based edited volume in which the seventeen contributors explore the concept of sovereignty in its evolving British context, and particularly in relation to Scotland. This is a very welcome exercise at a time when sovereignty has become a key term of theoretical and normative debates about the changing nature of the state and citizenship in the face of globalisation, multiculturalism, new nationalisms, and such. These conversations, concerned as they often are with idealised formulations for how to work out just social and political relations, can become highly abstract. A book like this helps bring the matter back down to Earth. At the same time the debate about sovereignty also has a highly local and concrete significance in Scotland. Arguments in favour of devolution and the new parliament have been grounded in conceptions of a Scottish tradition of political thought

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about sovereignty, and the notion of reasserting a downtrodden principle of popular self-rule.

Although its concerns are actually much wider, this book can be taken as, in a sense, a response to the various writings of Neil MacCormick, who has been engaged with the broader philosophical question of modern sovereignty, its practical implications for Scotland, and the history of the idea in relation to the Union (e.g. 1998). In their Introduction the editors lay out the book's aim: 'to explore what the historical record can tell us of the constitutional problems that may arise and can reasonably be expected to develop between Westminster and these new legislative bodies [in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland]' (p. 2). But there is also a laudable goal of offering a corrective to Scotland's own peculiar 'whiggish' popular history associated the Constitutional Convention and the consolidation of elite and popular opinion around the new constitutional settlement. This is not simply a matter of countering the myth of Scotland as peculiarly committed to democracy, but one of exploring the messy reality, the twists and turns of history, the failed gambits and unexpected consequences, that make up Britain's, and thus Scotland's, constitutional baggage.

Of the fifteen chapters after the Introduction, the first deals with the development of parliamentary Sovereignty in Britain as a whole, one deals with the Treaty of Union, seven deal with Scotland, two with Ireland, one with Ulster, one with Wales, one with the Dominions, and one with the American Revolution. Wisely, the chapters are arranged roughly chronologically rather than geographically, conveying a sense of the ebb and flow, and mutual impacts, of constitutional conflicts throughout a complex, varied, and evolving imperial system. Thus one begins to see, for instance, the Scottish tradition of constitutional complaints advanced in key documents such as the Claims of Right of 1689, 1842, and 1988, more in the round, as one strand in a larger political system whose very fabric is partly a network of documented agreements, which at one moment bind forces together, and at another become bones of contention. Particularly welcome in this regard are H. T. Dickinson's chapter on the American Revolution, which examines conflicting conceptions in the colonies and in Britain regarding the relative sovereignties of the King and the Parliament, and Ged Martin's acerbic look at the Dominions and the lessons they might offer for Scottish independence. It is not that these two chapters are superior, all the chapters are efficient and ably presented, but they especially bring to our attention comparisons to Scotland's situation that are less often made.

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This is definitely 'history' in the traditional sense, which is to say that sometimes the blow by blow of events recounted in specific chapters threatens to overwhelm the thematic continuity of the book. There are no real hypotheses or organising models laid out, and those of a more social scientific bent may find this frustrating. But those satisfied by culling limited comparisons and cautionary tales from the welter of history may find it quite rewarding. The only serious complaint is a technical one. With an exceptionally small and tightly packed typeface, the book is fatiguing to read. What has been gained in terms of economy - a remarkable number of words per pence - must be paid for in eye strain. It should be noted that this is not in keeping with the normally handsome volumes produced by Tuckwell.

Hutchinson's **Scottish Politics in the Twentieth Century** is a part of the British History in Perspective series once published by Macmillan, but recently taken over by Palgrave. As such it joins earlier volumes in the series on Scotland in the Nineteenth Century, the Eighteenth Century, and the Middle Ages. It is a book that makes modest promises, and pleasantly delivers a bit more than expected. The author suggests at the outset that the book aims to fill a gap - that there has been little written about Scotland's twentieth-century politics as a whole, and instead the period is covered mainly by monographs on aspects of Scottish Labour history and on the rise of home rule politics. He suggests that the only real comparator is the later parts of Michael Fry's **Patronage and Principle** (1987), although one might argue that Christopher Harvie's **No Gods and Precious Few Heroes** (1998) makes a more obvious comparison. The difference with Harvie's book is that Hutchinson's is genuinely a history of politics, whereas Harvie's book ranges more widely across politics, society and culture.

This is not a book driven by any bold thesis. Its main mission is, again, more corrective. Hutchinson tries to get behind the present perspective, from which Labour dominance, allegiance to the welfare state, and the linked rise of effective support for home rule can seem like an inevitability unfolding since the latter nineteenth century, to recover the remarkable success (and perhaps even hegemony) of moderate unionist Conservatism from the end of World War I into the 1950s. He does not deny the subsequent rise of the familiar left-of-centre consensus, but makes clear how different things were not that long ago. I began this book expecting a somewhat staid account of the shifting fortunes of the political parties in Scotland, and the book is indeed rooted in first hand documentary data on and by the parties. But by combining accounts from both party headquarters and branch constituency

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records, along with other contemporary sources, a nicely fleshed out and contextualised story emerges. So the party histories become core threads in a more general account of the institutional alliances that make up the broader political environment of any given period.

The broad strokes are, of course, the decline of the Liberals, the fitful rise of the SNP, and the shifting dominance of first the Conservative Unionists and then Labour. Within this frame attention is paid not just to fortunes at Westminster, but also to local council elections, and to the varying states of health of grassroots party organisations in terms of membership, funding, and general *esprit du corp*. Moreover, these well-elaborated party histories are located in their broader nexus of institutional support, from lawyers, educators, the press, churches, and universities. Thus Hutchinson reminds us that the recent alliance of these pillars of civil society behind the 'anything-but-the-Tories' party was mirrored in the inter-war period and for while after in a similar alliance around the Conservatives. To be sure, these were conservatives often amenable to state intervention, with, for instance, a strong record of support for Scotland's extensive public housing, which later came to be seen as a key factor in Labour support. There is also very plausible speculation that the diverging fortunes of the Conservatives in Scotland and England was a matter of their differing abilities to disengage their reputations in the post-1945 period from the patronage of the aristocracy, and link them to the developing middle and professional classes, groups that developed different relations to the state in Scotland and England.

Also worth noting is that due attention is paid to the role of women in Scottish politics, but by mainstreaming them in the text, rather than isolating them in a special chapter. This is achieved partly by the broader focus on party organisation and activists, rather than just leading parliamentary figures. The book concludes with a brief Epilogue on the post-1979 years which by comparison with the previous chapters, gives a much sketchier sense of the last twenty years. It also ends on a rather downbeat assessment and prognosis for the new parliament. One wonders if this is because the author harbours fundamental doubts about devolution (if so, this is not apparent from the rest of the text), or whether the book was going to press in the first few months of the parliament, before it had found a somewhat surer footing. But perhaps the more familiar lesson here is that the historical perspective requires some temporal distance, and we are not yet able to see the new parliament in this way, not even if we are historians.

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