

## **REVIEW: L'AUTONOMIE ÉCOSSAISE**

*Paul Henderson Scott*

Keith Dixon (ed.) (2001), **L'Autonomie Écossaise: Essais critiques sur une nation britannique**, Ellug (Grenoble); 160F/24.39E, ISBN 2843100267

In 1998 Michel Duchein provided for French readers an accomplished history of Scotland, **Histoire de L'Ecosse** (Fayard). Now they are offered a wide-ranging collection of essays on the situation in Scotland, mainly by Scottish specialists but translated into French. The editor, Keith Dixon, has been teaching Scottish studies in French universities, Grenoble and now Lyon, for 17 years and is therefore well placed to explain one country to the other. His aim, he says in the Introduction, is to present a wide panorama of contemporary Scotland both to students specialising in the subject and to a wider public.

In the first essay, Alice Brown gives a succinct and lucid account of the events immediately leading up to the Referendum of 1997 and the election of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. I would not dispute any of this, except on one point. She says that the SNP refused to take part in the Constitutional Convention 'on the pretext that it would be dominated by Labour'. This was hardly a pretext, because the composition of the Convention gave Labour a large majority, but it was not the essential reason. I was a member of the committee which drew up the Claim of Right of 1988 which led to the Convention and I was involved in the discussions in the SNP about participation. My own view was in favour, but the argument which prevailed

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was that the SNP could not take part in a body of which the declared aim was to strengthen the Union and, in the words of George Robertson, 'kill the SNP stone dead'. Why then, it might be asked, did the SNP campaign jointly with Labour and the Liberal Democrats in the 1997 Referendum? The reason, of course, was that all three parties wanted a Scottish Parliament, but for different reasons. For the SNP it was a decisive step towards independence; for the others a means of preventing it. Which was right is now the central question of Scottish politics.

Effective as Alice Brown's essay is as an opening to the general theme of the book, I think that it would have been helpful to have included a short historical chapter explaining how Scotland lost its Parliament in the first place. It certainly puzzled the French at the time. When the news reached the court of Louis XIV, Saint-Simon recorded in his Memoirs:

It passes understanding how so proud a nation, hating the English, well-acquainted with them through past sufferings and moreover so jealous of their own freedom and independence should have submitted to bow their necks beneath such a yoke.<sup>1</sup>

It was not only the French who were, and are, puzzled. The issue has been more obscured than clarified by the conventional historical view which on this point has been little better than unionist propaganda. In defiance of the contemporary evidence, the Union has been represented as a reasonable and freely negotiated bargain in which the Scots sacrificed their independence for concessions on trade. David McCrone in his essay in this book reflects this view when he calls the Union a marriage of convenience; it was in fact more of a shot-gun wedding. I have written three books on this subject, but the established view dies hard.<sup>2</sup>

McCrone's essay is however not about history, but about the complex question of how does the Scottish case fit into the vocabulary of sociology where the words, state, society and nation, seem at times to have a precise meaning and at times to melt into one another. By some definitions, Scotland

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<sup>1</sup> *Duc de Saint-Simon, Memoirs* (41 volumes, Paris 1901) Quoted in John S. Gibson's *Playing the Scottish Card: The Jacobite Invasion of 1708* (Edinburgh 1988) p.103.

<sup>2</sup> *1707: The Union of Scotland and England* (1979); *Andrew Fletcher and the Treaty of Union* (1992 and 1994); *The Boasted Advantages: The Consequences of the Union of 1707* (1999) (All Edinburgh).

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would not exist at all; but McCrone has no doubt that Scotland is a nation, if only because most of the inhabitants think so. He thinks that this sense of nationhood does not derive from historical memories of Scotland before 1707 (I am not sure that he is right about that) but because of the network of Scottish institutions which make up, in the term first used by Adam Ferguson, civil society. His conclusion is that the European Union offers Scotland the opportunity to escape from the the anomaly of stateless nationhood and become a society of a new kind whose time has at last arrived.

The sub-title of this book, 'une nation britannique', is an ingenious reference to the issues discussed by McCrone. Is Scotland a British nation and what does that mean? If Scotland is a nation, and few people doubt that, then Britain must be something else, a multi-national state of the kind which has broken up all over Europe.

Lindsay Paterson's essay is also concerned with the institutions of civil society which Scotland developed as a mechanism of internal autonomy after the loss of the Parliament in 1707. The unpopular Union therefore gradually became acceptable because it combined Scottish control over nearly everything inside the country with access to the empire. For this reason Scotland in the 19th century already enjoyed the autonomy which was the aim of nationalist movements elsewhere in Europe. Two factors have destroyed this comfortable arrangement, the end of the empire and Margaret Thatcher's disregard of Scottish autonomy. Scottish civil society therefore helped to bring about the restoration of the Scottish Parliament.

Paterson sees a possibility of tension between the Parliament and civil society. In Scotland as elsewhere there is general disillusionment with the institutions of the State. Parliament might be seen as another of these institutions with civil society performing its historical role as the defender of the people against the State. 'If the people are sovereign and civil society represents the people, then any external restriction on Scottish politics will be intolerable.' He does not think that independence is the only possible solution, but he is convinced that a dynamic has been released which marks the end of the conception of Scotland as a mere autonomous component of a sovereign United Kingdom.'

Keith Dixon began his Introduction with a reference to Tom Nairn's book of 1977, **The Break-Up of Britain**. In the final essay in this new book, Nairn considers how far this process has reached in the following twenty years. He sees the old structure of myth, pomposity and deference in a terminal state of

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decay. It has attempted to hold on to Scotland by means of a long list of reserved powers which are 'grotesque', 'astonishing' and 'incredibly British'. They even reach the absurdity of declaring that the Scottish Act of 1706 and the English Act of 1707, which ratified the Treaty of Union, remain in force. (They are full of lapsed provisions and have been repeatedly ignored and violated) He suggests that the only course is for Scotland to forge ahead and evolve its own modern constitution.

This book is a stimulating collection of admirable essays which are both provocative and informative. It should tempt a French audience to take a new look at their ancient ally, but it would be good also to see another edition in the original language of the contributions.

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