

REVIEW: SCOTTISH NATIONALITY

Michael Rosie

Murray G H Pittock (2001), **Scottish Nationality**, Basingstoke: Palgrave, Pb, ppxii+187, ISBN 0333726642, £15.50

Murray Pittock set himself an unenviable task in writing this book: to explain, according to its cover, 'what made Scotland a nation across the whole of its history, while also focusing closely on the issues of the present day'. The constraints of doing so in fewer than 200 pages, it can be imagined, called for a high degree of selectivity on what was included, and what was glossed over. Unfortunately, the casualties of this selection process include critical engagement with the key terms in the debate over nationalism, national identity and 'the nation'. On the debate over 'the nation' – what it might be, and the period in which it developed – Pittock refers the reader to his **Celtic Identity and the British Image** (1999). For *Scottish Nationality*, 'suffice it for present purposes to say that the present author has more sympathy with the historical position of nations as mediaeval realities ... than with the over-determined Anderson/Gellner view which sees them as products of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries ...' (p.2). But what does Pittock mean by Scottish 'nationality', and how does this concept differ from, and inter-connect with, concepts of 'the nation', 'patriotism', 'nationalism', or 'national identity'? Pittock contents himself by defining his subject matter as: 'Scottish nationality, defined in the broadest sense in terms of the external, objectifiable ways in which ideas or feelings of Scottish difference are and have been articulated or displayed' (p.1). This vague formulation begs rather more questions than it answers, in particular what is meant by 'Scottish difference'. Given the lack of clarity in the book's objectives, Pittock's clear enthusiasm for, and his knowledge of, early-modern Scottish history serves to produce an often muddled narrative

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offering insights into questions which are never clearly enunciated. It is often simply unclear whether this book is intended as a general primer to Scotland's history; Scotland's mediaeval claims to 'national' status (in the realm of theory or in the political practice of its elites); or to the development of Scottish Nationalism. It is possible for a book to do all three, of course, but if this is Pittock's intention, it simply does not come off.

The structure of the book follows a roughly chronological pattern, the first chapter dealing with 'Scottish Nationhood to 1707'. Again, the reader is left rather puzzled as to how the issues and controversies Pittock narrates fit into a general pattern of 'nationality', for the key questions remain unstated and concepts such as 'the nation', 'nationality' and 'nationalism' seem to be used interchangeably at some points. Take, for example, Pittock's claim that the Declaration of Arbroath (1320) represented 'a statement of (Scotland's) completed nationality', and begs the question (which Pittock does not answer): 'was Scotland a "nation" before this, in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries?' (pp.28,29). In Pittock's view those 'who reject a pre-eighteenth century nationalism' are indulging in 'postmodern semantics'. After all, 'if it [the Declaration of Arbroath] looks like nationalism, sounds like nationalism and smells like nationalism, then that is what it is' (p.29). If Pittock has discovered the essential and unchanging historic aroma of nationalism (although not, it seems, of 'nationality' or 'the nation') then he does not enlighten us further.

By the second half of the book Pittock's focus has drifted resolutely, and explicitly, towards nationalism (rather than the always vague nationality), and, particularly, towards what might be regarded as nationalism with a capital 'N'. The title of Chapter Four, which, in the chronological scheme of the book, deals with the period c1914-1997, speaks volumes for Pittock's understanding of his term 'nationality': the chapter is entitled 'The Scottish National Party'. It seems strange, even if constrained by space, for Pittock to focus so narrowly on the SNP, not least since that party was formed only in 1934 and remained, not to put too fine a point on it, on the fringes of Scottish political life until the 1960s. Demands for greater Scottish political autonomy, one 'objectifiable' articulation of 'Scottish difference', have never been the sole remit of the SNP, and, indeed, at various times, and with differing motivations, more popularly supported parties have explicitly represented themselves as 'the party of Scotland'. Given Liberal hegemony across the Scottish nineteenth century, and Labour dominance in the latter

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stages of the twentieth, Pittock's failure to address the Scottish 'difference' articulated by these parties is a revealing one. It seems a major failing that what might be loosely termed the 'nationalist' wings of the Liberal and Labour parties are either ignored, or, where mentioned, disparagingly set aside. In discussing the aftermath of the 1992 Westminster election, for example, Pittock dismisses those cross-party groups (such as Scotland United) which briefly emerged to challenge the Conservative government on the Scottish constitutional issue, as 'Unionist Home Rule fronts' (p.123). In Pittock's view, we are left to conclude, nationalism can only come with a capital 'N'. But it is also clear that if all Nationalists are equal, then some Nationalists are more equal than others. Pittock gives short-shrift (and little space) to what might be termed the Nationalist left, and displays some sympathy (and gives considerably more space) to the more esoteric sects on the Nationalist right. Wendy Wood, for example, is held in some reverence, Pittock claiming that Wood's address to the 1961 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland led to the Kirk's Home Rule stance. Wood was a less influential figure than Pittock suggests – the General Assembly of 1945 had voted overwhelmingly in favour of a Scottish legislative assembly, and there were clear Home Rule tendencies before this. Less savoury Nationalists, such as the obscurantist Siol nan Gaidheal, are rather blithely described as having 'provided a brief and colourful revival' of Celticism during the 1970s (p.124). The focus on these fringes of Nationalism – and the near-invisibility of forms of nationalism outwith the SNP – suggest that this book is less about 'nationality' than about Nationalism, and further, about a Nationalism of a particularly romantic-patriot hue.

If, by Chapter Four, the (never clear) focus has blurred, then the concluding Chapter suggests that Pittock has run out of material. Attempting, ostensibly, to 'illuminate the speed with which the debate on identity in contemporary Scotland is growing and changing', Pittock, rather unconvincingly, seizes upon football 'as a symbol of Scottish political identity' (p.130). Given the burgeoning literature on Scottish 'identity', Pittock seems strangely reliant on a very small number of sources, and comes to the rather limp, and football-centred, conclusion that 'a Protestant national identity is arguably still a strong part of the Scottish game' (p.132), but that 'sectarianism ... is more evidenced in perception than behaviour' (p.135). Other possible lines of cleavage are treated equally superficially, and there are some glaring deficiencies. One despairs, for example, of the lack of female actors, or indeed any concession to gender differences, throughout Pittock's narrative.

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There is little here on the role of gender, or, indeed, class or ethnicity, in the development, maintenance and expression of Scottish nationalism or Scottish identity.

The weaknesses of this book relate to the ambition of Pittock's stated aim – a comprehensive, and concise, overview of 'Scottish nationality' from the beginnings of Scottish history – and the ensuing need to 'provide a brief summary of what seem to be the salient and contributive points of Scottish history' (p.1). Of necessity such a book must be highly selective in the actors and processes it covers: in this case the selections appear to have been made to the detriment of a broad and critical examination of 'nationality' (whatever Pittock may mean, precisely, by that term) or of 'nationalism'. Pittock's omissions in the latter half of this book, added to the conceptual vagueness of the questions being addressed, sorely undermine what might have been a valuable contribution to the debate over 'Scotland'.

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