

REVIEW: IN SEARCH OF SCOTLAND

Christopher Harvie

Gordon Menzies, ed., **In Search of Scotland**, Edinburgh: Polygon at Edinburgh/BBC/Historic Scotland, 2001, pp. xv + 240, over 100 Illustrations, £12.99. ISBN 1 902930 23 1.

In 2000 the BBC commissioned Simon Schama to present **The History of Britain**, and invested millions in the project. One has no way of finding out quite what the impact of the series has been - metropolitan PR is, these days, as good at hiding failure as its is at touting success - but it does not seem to have been the runaway success that Kenneth Clark's **Civilisation** was in the late 1960s. Even favourable critics had to grit their teeth to endure some of its episodes - the knights from Central Casting bashing one another, in a seeming reprise of Monty Python and the Holy Grail, the literal flagging-up of metaphors - cue sea, cue clouds - while we provincials writhed at the banal, London-centred intellectual slothfulness of the whole thing.

In Scotland the BBC got a sort of 'regional opt-out': the series **In Search of Scotland** presented by Dr Fiona Watson of Stirling University. This was bright and lively (though not lacking Pythonesque moments: William Wallace's martyrdom seemed to consist of being run over by a No. 38 bus). The earlier episodes, however, came bang up to date in the information they brought about the results of new discoveries and theories. Watson was relentlessly cheery - not always appropriately, given subject matter which was often very dark - but more original than Schama, wearing historical clichés as smoothly as his chinos.

In Search of Scotland - the book - is well-produced, illustrated in colour, and competitively priced. I have yet to see it reviewed in any London

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publication. Schama was fairly comprehensively knocked about, but as Sarah and Toby from Interprint PR will tell you, all publicity is good publicity. This raises a problem fundamental to the instability of the devolution settlement. While Scotland was integrated via the Union, its affairs were of some interest to the London élite. They have now been repatriated with astonishing rapidity, while what survives of Scotland in London is a sort of caricature of the place, dominated by **Braveheart** and **Trainspotting**. The Beeb is now giving us David Starkey's murmuring waxworks in the Henry VIII Show, and then we are to get Simon Schama's **Famous Brits**. Thanks.

In Search of Scotland does better than this but it is not, strictly, a book of the TV series. Some of the essays, T.C. Smout on 'The European Lifeline', or Richard Finlay on 'Pain and Pleasure: the Twentieth Century' are surveys which broadly parallel the programmes their authors advised on, others – notably Michael Lynch on 'Court and Church' – are rather sophisticated free-standing essays. Yet another category, Iain Armit on 'The Earliest Inhabitants' publicises new research findings. The result is an agreeably unorthodox volume which stresses the excitement of searching for the facts of Scotland's past while stressing the subjective nature of the quest.

What distinguishes Watson's programmes from Schama's is the stress on historical debate and discovery: the sense that history is something that had continually to be reinterpreted in the light of accumulations of new evidence as well as of differing ideologies. Hence, while in Schama 1066 figures as much as it did in Sellar and Yeatman, Watson in her own contribution, a useful sequel to her splendidly researched and sharply written **Under the Hammer** (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2000) on the Edwardian invasions, plays down the role of Bannockburn in the Scottish War of Independence. **In Search of Scotland** was pungent enough to send me on several occasions back to my own manuscript muttering 'have to revise this'.

There are one or two infelicities. There are lots of illustrations, mostly well reproduced though there are some lapses. They take their toll in weight – this is not a book for a rucksack – and the principle behind their choice is unclear. Chris Smout's chapter is largely accompanied by recent photographs, while Chris Whatley on the eighteenth century mainly uses portraits. Illustrations are such a fruitful source – particularly for schools – that a policy on their use, with space devoted to artists, reproductions, techniques, circulation and influence, is really necessary, and the rather sparse maps could be more

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informative. But, for thirteen pounds the book makes an excellent gift for any occasion.

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