

REVIEW: SCOTTISH HISTORIES

Louis Cullen

R. A. Houston and W. W. J. Knox (eds). **The New Penguin History of Scotland: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day**. London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press (in association with the National Museum of Scotland), 2001, 573 +. lviii, pp., £25, ISBN 0713991879.

Michael Lynch (ed.), **The Oxford Companion to Scottish History**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 732 + xxv pp., £25, ISBN 0199691207.

A French friend some years ago commented in Dublin on the fierce nationalism suggested by the names of banks and other businesses, all or many sporting the word Irish. The same comment would be equally applicable in Edinburgh where businesses proclaim their Scottish identity. There are also in both capitals many shops selling books, curios and objects of Irish or Scottish provenance. All this would be unthinkable in London or Paris. So much of world culture is derived from English or French influences that a proliferation of shops selling English or French culture is almost unthinkable. If there were such, they would have to be supermarkets rather than similar to the conventional shops which sell Scottish or Irish goods. The contrast is in part a function of the small scale of Scotland and Ireland (their culture, pace every Scot and Irishman, can be accommodated in a small shop), in part a consequence of the problem that proximity to a very large neighbour creates about their identity. The line between certainty and uncertainty is a fine one: Scots and Irish are aggressively certain or at least assertive about themselves.

The same circumstance helps to explain that an interest in their history is more widespread in Scotland or Ireland than in England. Many years ago, a London publisher observed that railway book stalls in Ireland sold serious

Professor L.M. Cullen is in the Department of Modern History, Trinity College, Dublin.

Scottish Affairs

history books. Though boastful of having travelled on every Scots line (bar one) I am not closely enough conversant with railway books stalls in Scotland to say that it was or is the case there; since this comment was made twenty years ago, the bookstalls have disappeared altogether in Ireland, apart from a few at terminuses. However, with or without railway bookstalls, serious books on history sell as many copies in total as do their counterparts in England, which, given their small population, means that they reach a much higher proportion of the population.

In Ireland, the wildly fluctuating moods of Anglo-Irish relations have long ensured a wide interest in history. In Scotland, the interest was perhaps less widespread, at least in scholarly terms. Scottish history departments were small and introverted departments, teaching and researching a pedantic or at least a rather remote sort of history; engaged in mysterious rites of their own; they were isolated from other history departments. Their situation was remarkably similar to that of Celtic Studies in Ireland. The School of Celtic Studies in Dublin is a tiny body: its work had little wider impact, and it was best known in the wider world for the ferocity of its reviews of work by rivals, and for the ill-concealed contempt of many of its members for the policy of reviving the language. Within the universities, departments of old and middle Irish were minuscule, very scholarly but isolated from the world at large. But if there are parallels between some of the academic bodies which held sway in the two countries, history itself is well and thriving in both Scotland and Ireland, for longer perhaps in Ireland but equally, and in very recent times even more so under the stimulus of new political developments, in Scotland. Current or recent events are a driving force in Scotland. However, the rising interest itself preceded the upturn by a decade or more, significantly stimulated by the writing of two teachers from south of the border who made Scotland their home. Rowy Mitchison was first and foremost in this movement, supplemented by Christopher Smout whose **History of the Scottish People** (1969) had a remarkable impact. They made Scottish history exciting, their work gaining a large public and, as a herald of the future, preceded the wider boom in history teaching and research. Conceding this implicitly, the section on Scottish historians in the **Oxford Companion** attributes the development of Scottish history specifically to the expansion of economic history: 'It was the development of economic history which had the first impact on the professionalisation of modern Scottish history' (p.309). It is only with T M Devine's **The Scottish Nation** in 2000 that the most influential, in the sense of best-selling, work on Scottish history can be seen firmly and clearly as written by a Scot. In the total story, however, if one is to

Review: Scottish Histories

be fair in assessing the background to later growth, one should not overlook Roy Campbell and Bruce Lenman, the quintessential Scot and the irrepressible one respectively, and Malcolm Gray whose work goes back far in the post-1945 era, and who does not I think get in the **Oxford Companion to Scottish History** the attention he deserves .

The relatively late development of Scottish history has led Scots to observe that history has been better served in Ireland. I am not sure that that was or is the case. John Donald, the remarkable publishing achievement of one man John Tuckwell, was a phenomenon of the 1970s and early 1980s: he published books and on a wide range in history and culture. His role was greatly envied in Ireland because there was no comparable house at this end, and a symbol of his role was that the first volumes of the proceedings of Irish-Scottish conferences came from his press. There is the equivalent now in Dublin in the Four Courts Press, which publishes a very large number of texts, the small or specialised sale of many of which would otherwise be difficult. While it is dangerous to generalise rashly, I think that in recent years the general works on Scottish history are larger, more numerous and, saying this diffidently, on the whole better than their Irish counterparts. In the case of monographs, the situation may be different. There are as many or more in Ireland, though this would not be true of economic and social history or of urban history. It would be true in political history; and the Northern Ireland problem itself has spawned a huge literature which is all its own.

The success of works on history such as Smout's, and more recently Devine's, have a counterpart in writing on Irish history by Roy Foster and Joe Lee, on British history by Linda Colley or by Simon Schama and, even more phenomenally, in France by Le Roy Ladurie who is literally a world household name. Inevitably this success has led to an explosion in Compendia, Companions and Encyclopaediae, and in multi-author volumes and series, as publishers have competed to take advantage of the market. In France and Japan it has long been the case to an alarming degree, with many senior historians becoming entrepreneurs harnessing the labours of colleagues in ambitious and often handsome volumes and series. As reference works such books have their appeal, in somewhat varying degree, for historians, students and general reader alike. But they, or at least the compendium-type work, also have a fascination of their own, akin to that enjoyed by the Guinness Book of Records: once taken up, a volume is hard in idle moments to put down.

Scottish Affairs

Oxford University Press have now brought out **Companion** volumes for the three kingdoms, the most recent being the Scottish volume. Michael Lynch's volume can thus be compared with the Irish volume edited by Sean Connolly, and the English one edited by John Cannon. The Connolly and Cannon volumes follow a straightforward approach: they have a very large number of short entries, and can be consulted with little reference to the index. Michael Lynch's **Oxford Companion to Scottish History** adopts a different approach: many of the entries are very long, presented under very broad headings, with the sections within a main entry being put together by several authors. Connolly and Cannon on the other hand can be flicked through with the ease of the zapper of a restless TV viewer. The Lynch approach is less common for this sort of volume. It does mean, however, that a reader can have an in-depth read on a topic and its background, though it remains a little less user-friendly as a quick reference source for the reader.

The English and Irish **Companion** volumes are free from a self-conscious awareness that they are being compiled at a moment of any significance: in the case of the Scottish volume, on the other hand, in its own words its preparation 'at a point in Scotland's story where the political future remained uncertain yet when there was also emerging what was recognised, both inside and furth [sic] of Scotland, as a cultural renaissance – described by some as a second Scottish Enlightenment – inevitably made its mark on the shape of the **Companion**'. This self-conscious tone is by no means unique to the **Oxford Companion to Scottish History**. It is as strong, if not stronger, in a second major volume on Scotland, the **New Penguin History of Scotland**: the two volumes thus serve as major measures, not likely to be rivalled for some time, of the current mood in Scottish history. **The New Penguin History** is a work of haute vulgarisation, similar, though on a somewhat grander scale, to Roy Foster's **Oxford History of Ireland**, first published in 1989 and since republished in several formats.

According to the introduction to the Penguin volume, 'The apparent lack of informed knowledge of Scotland's past is one of the inspirations for this volume' (p. xiii). In the introduction, the question of Identity comes up in various headings, and in a long section described as 'discovering Scotland's history'. Even more so, these issues hover over Christopher Harvie's long conclusion, recognising warts as well as beauty spots in Scotland's new cultural and political profile, making comparisons with Ireland and Germany, and viewing Scotland as a possible or likely candidate for new status after the 2003 election. In between introduction and conclusion, the march of a nation

Review: Scottish Histories

is chronicled. Medieval history prepared Scots to be 'active participants in the new world order' (p.90); in the background to the Union 'there is also much to celebrate in these decades' (p.267); the vernacular literary revival by the eighteenth century was 'all the more remarkable' (p.330); Scots by 1832 had a 'unique blend of experiences and identities' (p.351) and in a somewhat later assurance to the reader 'Scotland had a remarkably confident national identity' (p.410). This is not to question the validity of these statements: Scotland was and is a remarkable country. However, the congratulatory tone and its repetition, makes the volume peculiarly the product of a well-defined point in time.

The number participating in the **Oxford Companion to Scottish History** is impressive. It is about 186, and the editor says with a flourish that it is three times the number who have collaborated in any other enterprise: 'In no other single place, it might be claimed, have so many written so much about Scotland's past'. This is also twice the figure of those who collaborated with Sean Connolly in the **Irish Companion**, and still larger than the number in the lively and refreshing Blackwell **Companion to Irish Culture** edited by W.J. McCormack. That volume does not list the contributors (and in the first edition even omitted erratically their names at the foot of entries). However, it is well short of the number of hands (or pens) deployed in the **Scottish Companion**, and seems less than the number in the Connolly volume. In his introduction, moreover, the editor says that the volume stretched resources in manpower, a different picture from the confident tone of the **Scottish** volume.

Scottish history is in a lively state. The **Companion** is on a grand scale, and the **New Penguin History of Scotland** holds its own comfortably with similar books elsewhere and with the great single-volume books by Mitchison, Smout and Devine. There is an engaging freshness or topicality about the two books (even if they can get carried away into some hype). By contrast, the **Oxford Companion to English History** is a skilled and workmanlike volume, little effected by the ripples in the English pond created by Jonathan Clark or Linda Colley, and Connolly's formidable Irish volume is a sober professional one, apart from the revisionist echo, at heart a purely political question of the frontiers between civil and militant action, which sometimes intrudes into individual entries. Good though the two **Scottish** volumes are, and durable contributions to Scottish history by an army of capable scholars, they reflect strikingly the thinking of Scots, or at least of Scottish historians, at a moment which may be either a decisive one or not in their history. In later years they will be a mirror to an age in which Scotland, in the sort of destiny that these

Scottish Affairs

volumes appear to map out, will either have secured its identify or failed to do so.

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