

REVIEW: THE POWER OF THE PAST

Jonathan Hearn

Edward J. Cowan and Richard J. Finlay (eds), **Scottish History: The Power of the Past**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002, pb, 279pp, £16.99, ISBN 0 7486 1420 6.

Gordon Menzies (ed.), **Who are the Scots? and The Scottish Nation**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002, pb, 290pp, £ 9. 99, ISBN 1 902930 38 X.

Scottish History brings together several leading historians of Scotland to explore the social and political construction of history – history as rhetoric – in the making and remaking of the Scottish nation. Framed by the editors' introduction to this constructionist approach, and a final essay of broader sociological reflections on national identity by David McCrone, the book's twelve chapters progress from medieval imaginings of Pictish kingship to more recent 'forgettings' of women's contributions to Scottish radicalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The chapters are consistently engaging, adding up to an unusually coherent edited volume. Despite the coverage of diverse topics over a long span of time, the clear theoretical concern with constructionism, and substantive focus on Scotland, pull it together well. It is a valuable addition to the literature associated with the idea of 'the invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), while capable of critical purchase on that idea, as when McCrone observes that 'The "construction" of tradition is a charge often made against the new or oppositional nationalisms rather than those of the "centre", whose traditions are deemed matters of fact, because they are matters of power' (p. 261).

There were several high points for this reviewer. Dauvit Brown's chapter examines the problem of the Picts for medieval Scots trying to lay claim to a

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political history independent from England. He identifies a shift from earlier historical conventions in which Scots were readily portrayed as an Irish tribe that had coexisted with the Picts, to new stories in which Scottish inhabitation of the whole of Scotland is pressed deep into the past, and Scottish and Pictish kingly lineages are merged into a single Scottish record. In documents such as Bisset's 'Pleading' (1301) and the Declaration of Arbroath (1320), provoked by Edward I's pretensions to overlordship, Scotland is portrayed as the longstanding homeland of the Scots, a story eventually codified in Fordun's **Chronica** and Bower's **Scotichronicon**. Nicely complicating this picture, Steve Boardman's chapter shows that, nonetheless, themes of Britishness in Scotland persisted in late medieval Scotland. He observes that many of the aristocratic and privileged classes traced their belonging in Scotland to their service to Malcolm III and (saint) Margaret, many arriving in Scotland from England and further lands during the expansionist period of the Canmore dynasty. While the histories of Fordun and Bower stressed the continuity of the Scottish line, there were also secular Scots vernacular works, appealing to these classes, which played on Arthurian themes and invoked Merlinic prophecies. After all, what was good for the goose was good for the gander, and during the years of Anglo-Scottish conflict, Margaret's Englishness provided some basis for Scottish claims to the English throne, and a wider British heritage.

Michael Lynch argues that the history of the Reformation has been left too much to the faithful, who are too inclined to see it as a radical and popular movement from below. He suggests thinking about Reformation in terms of a fourfold schema of two dimensions: (1) rapid versus slow change, and (2) led from above versus from below. In his assessment Scotland experienced a two-speed process, a rapid Reformation from above c.1557-1567, in which elites shifted their ecclesiastical allegiances while remaining 'firmly in control', and a slower Reformation from above c.1560-1638, in which, over a few generations, the new Kirk and ministerial class inculcated Presbyterian beliefs in the population. This was also a period of significant growth in state power under James VI (1567-1625). But the state-project of Reformation produced a radicalised population prepared to make ambiguous challenges to the state itself under the banner of the Covenants. Considering the role of ministers, lawyers and lairds in fomenting the national covenants, perhaps a further notion of radicalism from the middle is needed. Ted Cowan picks up the story at the far end of the Covenanting period in the 'Killing Times'. He shows how much of our popular image of the persecutions of the late

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seventeenth century covenanters is founded more on the imaginative martyrology of eighteenth and nineteenth century minister-historians than on actual events, giving strong reasons to doubt, for instance, that the famous drowning of the Wigtown Martyrs ever happened.

Over the seventeenth century leading Scots families increasingly invested in the production of elaborate genealogical texts attesting to their historical depth and social connectedness. David Allan explores this *terra incognita* of historical activity, lying between the peaks of Renaissance and Enlightenment history writing. Far from antiquarian indulgences, these family histories were bids to create and consolidate elite power under shifting circumstances. Placing them in a wider context, Allan suggests that they reflect a general European crisis in the social reproduction of elite families, involving demographic decline, indebtedness, and competition for promotion through royal and military service from new social groups advancing in the early modern state by merit rather than birth. These difficulties appear to have been given a local twist by the Union of Crowns, and the remoteness of the new political centre.

Resonating with Boardman's essay, Richard Finlay argues that historians of Scotland have focused on the Stewart/Jacobite aspect of monarchy in Scotland to the neglect of Scotland's relationship with later British monarchs, particularly Victoria. While George IV's 'jaunt' is often remembered, the links it forged between monarchy, tartanry and Scotland were rather short-lived and modest when compared to those forged by Queen Victoria. He views Victoria as 'chameleon-like' in her ability to customise her identity according to the various local customs within her realm – England, Scotland, India, Africa. With the new means of travel by train she made her presence felt widely in Scotland. On one hand, through her patronage of the highlands and various Scottish institutions, and her familiarity with both aristocratic and common folk, she provided a focus of Scottish allegiance that transcended religious, regional and class divisions within Scotland. On the other, she took on Scottishness in all its contradictions as part of her personal identity, worshipping in a Presbyterian church, and cherishing her (rather remote) Stewart ancestry. In short, Victoria loved Scotland, and the Scots loved her back.

I have followed my own prejudices to give a sampling of the book's arguments, but those chapters not addressed here are equally strong. The book operates at a meta-level of analysis: it is not so much about what

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happened in the past, as about how historians and others have represented the past. Inevitably, this means a certain amount of familiarity with Scottish history in the mundane sense must be assumed. For those in need of a more conventional overview of Scottish history, the combination into a single volume and republication of **Who are the Scots? and The Scottish Nation** provides a solid if occasionally prosaic starting point. The original books accompanied the two history series for BBC television by the same names, produced by Gordon Menzies in 1971 and 1972. The chapters have not been revised; instead, guides to further reading have been added at the end to take account of new perspectives. The first two chapters of the original **Who are the Scots?** have been omitted, because they dealt with archaeology and prehistory, areas in which understandings have been radically revised over the last thirty years. The new volume thus runs from the Roman period up to the Union of Parliaments.

The first 'book-within-a-book' is organised primarily around ethnic groups – Romans, Picts, Scots, Britons, Angles, Norsemen – and their interactions. A. A. M. Duncan's final chapter addresses the increasing cultural synthesis of these groups by the late thirteenth century. The second 'book' is organised more around episodes and key figures – e.g., Flodden, Restoration, James VI, Montrose and Argyll. T. C. Smout brings things to a close by examining the forces behind the Union of Parliaments, arguing that poverty and the Darien disaster were less the cause than the ineffectuality of the Scottish Parliament and more general needs for political and economic integration on all sides. The contributions as a whole stand the test of time, with some of the more searching chapters by G. W. S. Barrow on Anglo-French influences, Jenny Wormald on power struggles between major Scottish houses in the fifteenth century, and Ian B. Cowan's attempt to get beneath the stereotyped encounter between John Knox and Mary Queen of Scots, standing out in particular for this reviewer.

Considered together, **Scottish History** and **Who are the Scots? and The Scottish Nation** strikingly encapsulate changes over the last thirty years in how historians approach history. In the volume edited by Menzies, there is no over-arching theoretical concern, and the 'units of analysis' are those of common sense history – cultural groups, big events, famous persons. Nations clearly exist and have histories, and historians ask questions about the details of those histories. Cowan and Finlay's book by contrast treats the very ideas of 'histories' and 'nations' as problems to be explored through historical detail. But as they observe in their introduction, a concern with social

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construction need not degenerate into the theoretical nihilism towards which some postmodernism leans. In the larger ambit of inquiry there are places both for taking history as something there to be discovered, and for questioning that given-ness.

REFERENCE

Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), **The Invention of Tradition**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

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