

REVIEW: GEOGRAPHY, SCIENCE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Ted Cowan

Charles W J Withers, **Geography, Science and National Identity: Scotland since 1520** (Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography 33),
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 330pp, hb, £45, ISBN:
0521642027.

It is as fascinating as it is futile to try to discover how Scots of previous generations attempted to conceptualise their country. Our own mental maps owe a great deal to those produced by the Ordnance Survey, but what sort of images did people carry in their heads in an age before cartography? A twelfth century anthropomorphic account considered that Scotland resembled the form and figure of a man whose head and neck were furnished by the mountains and deserts of Argyll, and whose feet were upon the Norwegian Sea. His body was the great mountain range of the Mount, which extended from sea to sea, the right side represented by Moray, Ross, Mar and Buchan, while his legs were formed by the rivers Spey and Tay. Since Charles Withers commences his study in 1520 he mentions this specific example only en passant but he is concerned with a similar question, namely the exploration of how geographical knowledge has shaped the understanding of the Scottish nation, how notions of geography came to 'constitute the idea of Scotland as a national space'. He has thus embarked upon an absorbing quest in the course of which he has advanced 'a new area of geographical enquiry', rather inelegantly described as 'the historical geography of geographical knowledge'.

This excellent study charts much new ground, demonstrating that although geography as an academic discipline is comparatively recent (first taught for degree purposes at Edinburgh in 1908 and at Glasgow a year later) the

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subject's educational and practical value had been recognised much earlier, often outwith the academy. Professor Withers offers confirmation of this non-geographer's suspicion that delay in acceptance of the discipline may have been due to certain doubts as to its precise remit. Geography has at different times embraced antiquities (or as we would now say archaeology), statistics, natural science, topography, sociology and history, to note but a few aspects of the subject. That the debate continues is amply demonstrated in the author's introduction which, though full of interest, is possibly best passed over by the novice in favour of the conclusion which provides a much less cluttered and jargon-ridden account of what the book is about. Not to be missed, however, is John Cowley's map of 1734 (p. 27) entitled 'Display of the Coasting Line of Six Several Maps of North Britain' which brilliantly illustrates contemporary confusion about Scotland's precise configuration.

This survey of Scottish geographical knowledge (always commendably contextualised for the reader) begins with such Renaissance writers as John Mair, Hector Boece and George Buchanan, all of whom were European figures in their own right, deeply interested in the impact of such topics as climate and diet upon history, custom and, above all, manners. The country's first mapmaker, Timothy Pont, was active in the 1580s but new problems, challenging ideas of space, nation and identity, were a consequence of the Union of the Crowns in 1603. There is an invaluable chapter on the seminal figure of Sir Robert Sibbald, much cited in the historical literature but hitherto scantily studied. There can be little doubt that Scots participated to the full in scientific curiosity. It can be traced in their early, if abortive, colonial schemes in Nova Scotia, and it was sustained in the Darien experiment. That more can be made of all of this is not to criticise Withers who has quite enough to occupy him. As the shackles of theology slackened Scotland appeared to experience an unprecedented appetite for scientific enquiry. It should be noted, nonetheless, that the bounds of knowledge were less rigorously defined than was later the case. In the Darien decade Martin Martin wrote eloquently about Second Sight, Robert Kirk discussed the reality of fairies, and the crew of the Worcester, whose captain and first mate were to become the fatal victims of Scottish prejudice, saw a mermaid. Meanwhile Sibbald supervised – rather inefficiently it must be admitted – the co-ordination of the first Scottish geographical surveys, some of which dated back to the 1630s and '40s.

The book explores geography in the Enlightenment whose luminaries were particularly interested in its relationship with science, and hence its

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'usefulness' though, on the evidence supplied herein, geography did not apparently loom as large in this period as might have been expected. Public lectures on the subject were available by the 1760s and, of course, long before this chapter concludes (c.1830) poetry, print and paint had completely revolutionised attitudes to landscape. The nineteenth century was to prove the great age of self-help and the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake. More classes were made available in schools, institutions and even universities, while textbooks flowed from the presses. At the same time, the production and marketing of popular scientific journals was practically monopolised by Scots, as was the provision of cheap improving literature. Learned societies, often local, and often concerned with topography, natural history, and antiquities became all the rage, many quite democratic in keeping with the civic spirit of the time. As the author himself indicates, there is much more to be made of this period, but he can take the credit for indicating much of its richness and potential for future study.

Scottish involvement in the affairs of empire undoubtedly stimulated home interest in the subject of geography. Though Withers is correct to temper some of the triumphalism surrounding such matters, it is nonetheless remarkable that Scots played such a prominent role in world exploration, including that of the Arctic and the Antarctic. Grenfell of Labrador, doctor and missionary, was such a remarkable individual that this reviewer always assumed, until a moment of disenchanting enlightenment around the age of fifteen, that he must have been a Scot. The fact remains that thousands of schoolchildren, accompanied by as many of their seniors among the 'geographical laity', followed Livingstone into Africa and William Spiers Bruce to Antarctica.

One of the great strengths of the study is that the author always stresses this element of lay interest throughout, irrespective of period. One of his achievements, among several others, is to have opened a fascinating new window on Scotland's cultural and intellectual past, while contributing greatly to the ongoing debate about identity and the conundrum of Scottishness, by making some suggestions about what put the 'land' into the Scot.

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