

REVIEW: NEW HISTORY OF SCOTLAND

Graeme Morton

Murray G H Pittock, **A New History of Scotland**, Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2003, 342 + ix pp, pb, £8.99, ISBN 0-7509-2786-0.

There is something comforting (to this observer at least) in having a single-volume narrative history of Scotland, covering the entire period from the earliest times to the present day, which opens with the word 'Globalisation'. Many (well some?) of us might have preferred 'glocalisation', but, still, it was a sign that Scotland was not to be read in isolation, not its development nor its understanding. This latest synthesis from Pittock follows the nationalist themes identified in his **Scottish Nationality** (Palgrave 2001) and his still rather recent **Celtic Identity and the British Image** (Manchester University Press 1999).

Much of this latest work is a history of Scottish national identity, especially that found in the medieval period and, more recently, in the last century and a half. To evaluate the likely impact of Pittock's efforts one might well start by noting we are privileged to have had a good few histories of Scotland in recent years. Michael Lynch's **Scotland: A New History** (Century 1991) and Tom Devine's **The Scottish Nation, 1700-2000** (Penguin 1999) are celebrated rightly as masterful accounts, and **The New Penguin History of Scotland** (2001), edited by R. A. Houston and W. W. J. Knox, is the latest multi-authored collection jockeying to secure a lasting place in the historiography. And there are of course others, such as Fiona Watson's **Scotland: A History** (Tempus 2001), Gordon Menzies' edited **In Search of Scotland** (Polygon 2001) and Magnus Magnusson's **Scotland: the Story of a Nation** (HarperCollins 2000), this time tied-in to either TV or radio productions. Interestingly, all of these histories have weaved identity and nationalism into their explanations, often to an extent quite explicitly.

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So where will **A New History of Scotland** find its niche? It is certainly a highly readable book, benefiting from the author's customary free-flowing and engaging style. It is certainly a book that will appeal to the mythical general reader, whose interest comes inspired first and foremost from one or more of the Wars of Independence, the Reformation, the 1707 Union, the Enlightenment and the political struggle for devolution. All the headlines are there, and Pittock makes a virtue out of his intention to give these events greatest prominence. There is certainly the air of a jolly romp around the battlefield of Bannockburn and the bedchamber of Mary, Queen of Scots. All good fun and better in Pittock's hands than left unhindered in the work of the web masters and the pot boilers who pepper the popular market. Murray Pittock brings to the fore much of the latest scholarly activity with a skill that goes a long way to providing balance and perspective to any understanding of the great pub arguments around 1707 and Victorian North Britain. Still, a little quibble must be raised with a text let down by the use of quotation marks around key phrases and sentences, and even indented quotations, which then lack the relevant citation. The reader is left to guess which amongst a gathering of half a dozen or more references for each footnote is the one to which the phrase or quotation is attributable.

Pittock acknowledges more than once that he offers nothing more than the very briefest of overviews, starting with glacial construction of the land and the attempts by Neolithic farmers to tame the wilds, and concluding on the first Jack McConnell administration of the post-1999 Scottish parliament, in around 300 pages of text. He has certainly caught a fashion with a focus on the lasting influence of the environment on Scottish life and industry, and developing this to use Walter Scott's romantic depiction of the land of mountain and flood (from 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel', 1805), as a romantic theme in Victorian Britain, but a refrain originating from the geographical reality of the earliest times, and with a persistent relevance to this day (pp. 4ff). Perhaps because of this search for the earliest structures of Scotland and its identity, Pittock's approach has had to be aware of the dangers of historicism and other forms of Whiggism in his analysis, and he does this well. He wants to show us the continuities in Scotland's national history by giving due empathy to time and place, based on the rationale that there is a place called Scotland, and that there continues to be such a place, and that this needs to be explained. On the whole, he handles the difficult conceptual challenge of explaining continuity – and its fault-lines – with great care.

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The use of the past in the construction of national identity is a topic analysed throughout this text. Through the contemporary reinterpretation of Columba, for example, Pittock presents the Scottish nation at the time of the Declaration of Arbroath (1320) as 'the oppressed Israel defended from imperial aggrandisement by Judas Maccabeus'. It was a relic of St Columba chosen by the Scottish army to be carried into the battle of Bannockburn (1314) (p. 23) and, from the research of Lynch, that St Andrew offered an identity around which the Picts, Scots, Danes and Norwegians of medieval Scotland could find common cause (p.55). This works well in the analysis – it is an essential part of the re-production of cultural identity. Where I am less sure of Pittock's making of the nation is the roll call for the great and the good used to structure important points of the narrative. The Enlightenment and the literature of Scotland are examples of this (pp, 228-236, 241-249, 244-250). In part, this is an acceptable short-hand when word-space is tight. More interestingly, it is also used as the author's response to the belief that the histories of Scotland tend to side with the underdog, too readily depicting Scotland as a working class nation, with the result, he argues, that court and king are neglected (p.103). This is most obviously seen in the prioritisation of Wallace over Bruce, of Red Clyde over Presbyterian Edinburgh. But while such radicalism has been a popular theme in the study of Scotland's past, it only takes minutes to search for academic and popular histories of parliament and of the nation's royal past. And here there is a tension between historical reality and perception, especially within the context of identity formation.

From my own perspective as a student of nationalism I am intrigued by Pittock's history of 'Modern Scotland', the final chapter here, which is effectively a history of the political and civic nationalist organisations that crystallised into the Scottish National Party in 1934, although a number of schisms and grandstanding meant rival claims to Scotland's representation lasted into the immediate decades which followed (pp.266-290). It is a history found in more specific (although not technical or exclusionary) studies, such as James Mitchell's **Strategies for Self-government** (Polygon 1996), and I wonder whether the national framework has been narrowed unnecessarily.

A tour of the new Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, by way of contrast, would tie such a political argument to the culture of Scotland. It would leave the visitor stared down by a poster advertising Braveheart, the choice of Alex Salmond, former leader of the SNP, as his representative icon of the

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twentieth century; but that does not stop the Hillman Imp, the Amstrad wordprocessor and the Alba Hi-Fi joining the cocktail of political nationalism drunk from (of course it has to be there) the Irn Bru bottle of our youth. To be fair, the conclusion to this chapter, and the book (pp. 290-303), offers some of this cultural variety – from emigration to economic output, the Boys Brigade to Nye Bevan, Rab C to STV – but although the theme of heterogeneity is now to the fore, aware that pawky Scotland of the **Sunday Post** was no more the master narrative than any other in its time, and that Silicon Glen was an implant in the Scottish psyche that was heading for the nostalgia vendors, rather than the policy-makers, as R & D remained steadfastly absent, the global argument, which started this book, gradually falls out of sight.

That two-thirds of 'Modern Scotland' has its focus on a movement which sustained a membership more in the hundreds than the thousands in the 1920s and 1930s, and whose percentage of the electoral vote only reached double figures in 1970, peaking at 30.4% in October 1974, and fluctuating thereafter between 11.6% and 22.1% in general elections up until 2001, is perhaps not the broadest narrative for the twentieth century. Globalisation, or rather the globalisation of the local, is subsumed here under a political life too ordinary. Better Pittock's original aim to find a Scotland 'which by name and culture owes a direct debt to those who in the past called themselves Scots whatever ... they meant by it' (p.5). They meant the headline historical events, they meant political protest, but they continue to mean a culture of the everyday, having already sat down to the moveable feast of identity formation in the ever-long global age.

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