

REVIEW: DISCOVERING THE SCOTTISH REVOLUTION

John Brown

Neil Davidson, **Discovering the Scottish Revolution, 1692-1746**, London:
Pluto Press, 2003, xix + 378 pp, hb, £60 ISBN 0 7453 2054 6; pb,
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This is a modestly immodest book in always fully and fairly acknowledging its debt to other historians, past and present, who have written about Scotland in this period, whilst at the same time asserting that they are all wrong. It is attractively written and based on the wide knowledge of primary sources as well as secondary work, but it is its conviction that all others are out of step which sets it apart and gives it a distinctive quality. Such a full use of other work and such a moderate expression of complete dissent make for an unusual combination. As a result its tone, far from confrontational or controversial, is rather engaging.

So what does the author know that others do not? Perhaps it is best to use his own words as far as possible in answering this question. The book, according to Davidson, is 'about the only successful revolution Scotland has ever experienced', which saw the transfer of power from one class to another and Scotland's transition from a 'backward feudal economy into one of the centres of emergent capitalism'. Although he admits that the period 'has not previously been discussed in these terms', he insists on the reality of this 'pivotal, if largely unknown revolution'.

What gives him this insight which others lack, this understanding which involves such a fundamental reassessment? This obviously is the next question. There is no new historical evidence, and his interpretation is open to conventional objections. Other eighteenth-century Scottish historians

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would not see the defeat of Jacobitism and the abolition of heritable jurisdictions as a feudal collapse, if only because the power of the landed elite was as evident after 1746 as before. Another obvious objection is that Scotland's transformation into a commercial society and the start of industrialisation were longer term and mainly came later, a point which Davidson acknowledges in a long 'Epilogue' on economic development between 1747 and 1815 without allowing it to affect his reading of the earlier period. These and other objections are disregarded by an appeal to theory, specifically to Marxism; and it is this which underpins his dissent from received opinion. As he puts it in a section of his lengthy preface on 'Marxist theory and Scottish history': 'No matter how deeply one immerses oneself in the primary sources ...unless the material found there is used in a way informed by some theory of history, the resulting work is likely to remain a compendium of more or less interesting facts about the past'.

Such a simple appeal leaves itself open to parody – that it is only an assertion that facts have to be forced into a Marxist straight-jacket. It would be unfair and equally simple, however, to dismiss it out of hand. In the section of the preface on 'Structure, Narrative and Critique', Davidson describes his approach in the following way: 'We pan across relatively static decades in long shot, registering only the broadest impressions. We zoom in to register the "moments of force" in close up, omitting no detail'. In other words, he does not stick to the level of generalisation of New Left historians and theorists such as Perry Anderson and Alex Callinicos, whose writing are cited in places. Unlike them he consistently engages with specialist historical debate. If only for this reason, he deserves credit and has to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, invoking Gramsci and his concept of moments of force does not remove the objection that Marxist theory and factual interpretation fail to meld.

What is meant, in any case, by Marxist theory? This final question is impossible to avoid about writing so explicit and insistent on its Marxist credentials. There is even a brief appendix, 'Marx and Engels on Scotland', prefaced, disarmingly or not, by an admission that they rarely referred to Scotland and did not know much about its history. Davidson is also very clear, of course, that what he calls the classical Marxist theory of history, within which he sees himself as writing, is far more than its founding fathers, and at one point lists its main exponents (though adding that other names might be included): Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Lukacs, Gramsci and

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Benjamin. The last is the odd man out (though a case might also be made for Gramsci). Benjamin's fragmentary writings on aesthetics and aspects of consumer culture give him more in common with a Marxist postmodernist such as Frederic Jameson than with the others on the list and make him influential on present scepticism about meta-narratives. Whatever else he may be, Davidson is not sceptical.