

REVIEW: SCOTLAND'S EMPIRE

Christopher Harvie

Tom Devine, **Scotland's Empire 1600-1815**, London: Allen Lane, 2003, 461 pp, hb, £25.00, ISBN 0 713 99498 3.

Tom Devine's latest is, at first glance, a massive book: 2 inches across the spine and 476 pages long. It joins two other hefty efforts on the same subject, Michael Fry's **The Scottish Empire** (Edinburgh and East Linton: Birlinn and Tuckwell, 2001) and Niall Ferguson's television spin-off **Empire: How Britain Changed the World** (London: Allen Lane, 2003). Given the present preoccupation with 'liberal imperialism' in Whitehall and the State Department, is this a tribute to Scottish perspicacity? Rather ominous, however, has been the silence from two Scottish scholars whose credentials in this area seem rather more convincing than our three authors: John M. MacKenzie and Angus Calder. MacKenzie's scholarly monographs, notably **Imperialism and Popular Culture** (Manchester, 1998), show the materials for a masterly synthesis, while Calder's **Revolutionary Empire**, which took the story to the 1780s, was the intellectual history which the enterprise needed. Has the tale of its second volume (awaited impatiently since the first came out in 1981) already been told?

Meanwhile, there has been some preliminary sparring – good old no-holds-barred flyting – by Fry and Devine in the columns of the **Herald** and elsewhere, while young Ferguson (a little of whom goes a very long way) came north to denounce the whole home rule project as pointless and even dangerous, sounding even more the Unionist bluenose that he in fact is. Ferguson is a product of the history factory that the late Sir Jack Plumb ran so successfully at Christ's College, Cambridge, few of whose products – Simon Schama, David Cannadine, Linda Colley, Roy Porter – have lacked commercial success, or at any rate the full-time attentions of Sophie and

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Scottish Affairs

Emma from marketing. Whether they have actually extended the bounds of historical knowledge is another matter. But they represent our 'great black crow' and we had better realise this.

Tom Devine has possibly gone half-way along this trajectory. His **The Scottish Nation** was published in 1999 by Allen Lane, to great success, selling over 75,000 copies in hardback and paperback. There could be no faulting Devine's timing and much of the book was good. However, in my critique in the **Independent** I pointed out a tendency of Devine's history to mould itself round his own research interests – long on facts and archive-work, short on questions and indeed on historical philosophy. The result was a concentration on demography, population and agrarian change and urbanisation (all unquestionably important), but a disappointingly sketchy handling of manufacture, science, intellectual or literary life. As a result, Devine on the twentieth century became increasingly laconic as the political story ramified after 1960. The last third of the book has to stand comparison with J. J. Lee's magisterial **Ireland, 1912-1985** (1990), but one would have to be hyperpatriotic to say that it does.

Indeed, had Michael Fry brought his **Patriotism and Patronage** up to date, **The Scottish Nation** could have found itself facing a Sheriffmuir at least. Even when his conspectus is idiosyncratic and his ideology daft (a Fry-run independent Scotland would have blood on the streets) Fry understands how the who-whom of politics works and conveys this with the limpidity of Tocqueville and Trollope. Inspired by the success of **The Scottish Nation**, Penguin evidently thought they could manage a similar job with Devine's **Scotland's Empire**. Has it worked?

Fry has been scornful, while he was perhaps over-respectful to **The Scottish Nation** (in between came a stushie over Fry's **The Scottish Empire**): Devine had pored too much over documents, and not stood back to identify patterns; his data had gone out of control. In **Scotland on Sunday**, Gerald de Groot of St Andrews saw **Scotland's Empire** as a textbook masquerading as an original monograph, though he did not do his case any favours by failing to read any of Devine's other works: had he done so, he would probably have been far more critical. A gratuitously large amount of recycling seems to be going on. Like one of the Victorian three-decker novels, the ambitious scale of the format has distorted Devine's approach. Footnotes and bibliographical apparatus take up over 100 pages, though they show little evidence of new work in the archives, and lots of evidence of padding. About half of Chapter

Review: Scotland's Empire

3, 'Union and Empire', is on the well-trodden theme of the Union negotiations, and Chapter 4, 'Trade and Profit', has already appeared in the first volume of the multi-author **History of Glasgow** that he edited with Gordon Jackson in 1995; it is also not distant from his own **Tobacco Lords** of 1975. In Chapter 6 we are again in familiar country: Devine's argument for the 'marketisation' of the highland economy after 1745 was bold, original and backed up with formidable archive work: perhaps the strongest element of **The Scottish Nation**. Unquestionably it contributed to the 'push' factor, but do we have to read it again? Moreover, having got the Gaels across the Atlantic, there is disappointingly little about life in the settlements (something also apparent in the far stronger chapters on the Scots-Irish). Even the chapter on 'Colonizing India' (a problematic title, anyway, as 'colonize' tends to imply settlement), which starts well, veers off into a repetition of Chapter 3's generalities about the motives for the 1707 Union. Devine properly queries the notion that Indian success could be attributed to a Dundas dividend, but is then totally silent on the Cornwallis reforms and the openings they gave to the largely Scottish disciples of Jeremy Bentham. After this it is perhaps unsurprising that there is no reference to James Mill's six-volume **History of British India** (1818), but one would have expected some reference to Montrose's finest from an Aberdeen professor!

At the end of all these unrelenting pages, Devine asks whether the Empire was crucial to Scottish development, and concludes that it was. Eric Hobsbawm did the same in a sentence from **Industry and Empire** (1972):

Between 1700 and 1750 home industries increased their output by seven per cent, export industries by seventy-six per cent; between 1750 and 1770 (which we may regard as the runway for the industrial 'take-off') by another seven per cent and eighty per cent respectively.

Hobsbawm is not in the bibliography; nor is Victor Kiernan's brilliant study of the Imperial mentality, **The Lords of Humankind** (London, 1969); fundamentally, Devine's is a highly parochial vision, without any of the wicked intimacy of parochialism which marked J.K.Galbraith's **The Non-Potable Scotch** (London, 1964), his study of the Ontario Scots of his childhood.

Scotland's Empire is, in short, a great disappointment, from a historian who, when on form, can produce challenging and original work. It adds something to our knowledge, particularly of the Scotch-Irish and highland militarism,

Scottish Affairs

but it has patently been published too early, before the author had time to mature his analysis. All good history, as Joe Lee remarked, is intellectual history, and of no subject is this more true than imperialism. This conviction was what gave both narrative and analytic strength to Angus Calder's **Revolutionary Empire**, yet it does not seem to have concerned Tom Devine at all.

This is not necessarily the author's fault. London publishers, having foisted Simon Schama's **History of Britain** (BBC: 2000-2002) on a public bludgeoned by hype, believe that everything depends on saturation PR, and seem to have brought Devine's book forward to coincide with a TV series, the debate surrounding Robert Cooper-Tony Blair-type liberal imperialism and Niall Ferguson's **Empire** – the last being a forceful and attractive presentation of a farcically constricted agenda. Characters like Ferguson, and the tight little metropolitan media clique he represents, mean no good to our fledgling autonomy. The *historikerstreit* which looms ahead of us as New Labour decays is going to be long, more hard fought and more bitter than the 'revisionist' controversy in Ireland. In this, where does Devine's work stand? As the man said, on being asked the road to Dublin, 'If I were your honour, I wouldn't be starting from here.'

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