

## **REVIEW: SCOTLAND THE BRIEF**

*Ian Donnachie*

Christopher Harvie, **Scotland: A Short History**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 265+xiii pp, pb, £8.99, ISBN 0-19-210054-8

As anyone who has ever tackled or even contemplated such a project knows only too well, a single-volume survey of a country with a history as long as Scotland's faces formidable challenges. Indeed, the rationale of such projects are often as interesting as the end-results. Who is the intended audience? In terms of chronological coverage, when is the project to start and finish, both enormously tricky for different reasons? Will the treatment be chronological or thematic, or possibly a mixture of both, and how is this to be handled? Will it be essentially narrative or address historiographical debates or theories? How far will new approaches be privileged and account taken of such developments as gender, cultural or environmental history? What has to go in and what can be left out? When does history stop being history and start being current affairs?

And while there are a few brilliant generalists around, most of Scotland's historians are specialists. So the medievalist or early modernist is less familiar (and less in control) of the modern era, while the modernist struggles with the nuances of a less-documented and apparently incomprehensible medieval world, far less what lies beyond in the darker recesses of earlier histories. As might be expected, Chris Harvie, historian, commentator on modern Scotland and much else besides, deploys his powerful intellect to resolve many of these problems in his book. Being 'short' this may be a 'dwarf', as Harvie calls it, but it is undoubtedly one of the most interesting

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and readable among the recent deluge of historical surveys, dictionaries and companions to the subject.

How does this work out in practice? The model followed is a chronologically based narrative of six chapters, three of which deal with the early to eighteenth century period, two with the industrial-imperial era, and finally, one on the twentieth century. If chapter two is taken as typical, Harvie has trawled the modern scholarship to piece together a wide-ranging yet detailed picture of the country from 1100-1560, a tall order given the complexity of Anglo-Scottish relations and the international context. The narrative is cross-cut with treatments of landscape and townscape, with a strong emphasis on heritage and culture. These 'cameos', common in American text-books, also highlight the socio-economic dimensions of Harvie's 'key places', such as New Lanark, Glasgow, Dundee and Motherwell. The selection is otherwise eclectic, but always with a strong focus on the sense of place and its history.

All of the major themes in Scotland's past are here. The emergence of the Scottish kingdom and the vexed and long-term questions of relations with England feature strongly. Given Harvie's interest in cultural history, the Renaissance is well covered, proof, if evidence is needed, of a vibrant culture closely connected to Europe. He shows that the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, notoriously complex in their politics and religion, were clearly pivotal in the emergence of modern Scotland. Subsequent themes such as the Union, the Scottish Enlightenment, industrialisation, social change, the role of education, imperialism, politics etc, are covered in considerable detail and with the same informed analysis and strong opinions that have characterised Harvie's earlier work.

There are some splendid side-swipes at historical figures (too numerous to mention but in the twentieth century many of Harvie's 'precious few heroes': Joe Westwood, Arthur Woodburn, Willie Ross etc) or modern day personalities, who have clearly got up Harvie's nose. And he is just as merciless in his views of developments about which he is known to have strong and regularly expressed opinions (Scotland's oil, motor cars, railway closures, politicians of the 1960s, developers, [www.visitscotland](http://www.visitscotland), to name but a few).

I have always thought that to write about one's own country, you needed to distance yourself from it for a while. Harvie's long-term domicile in Germany, and his extensive knowledge of European history and politics,

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means he brings a strong international perspective to his view of Scotland. Whether, for Harvie, this means that Scotland always was (and remains?) more international in its outlook than some of our neighbours, begs the question of course. And while there is much to feel gloomy about in comparing Scotland's more recent history, especially its economic performance, social and educational provision, with those of other European countries, Harvie always remains positive. In particular this is true of his views on Scottish cultural achievement, founded in the lost nation, and apparently flourishing in the nation re-invented. If he is more than slightly cynical in his view of current Scottish politics, he cannot be blamed, because most of his readers probably feel the same – and that is hardly yet history.

Inevitably, with this sort of survey and a great deal of competition in the market place, readers are entitled to ask what this particular volume has to commend it? Well, the history is sound and up-to-date, the author constantly courts controversy and fills the book with interesting opinions and ideas, albeit more challenging and controversial as he moves nearer the modern world and that Scotland about which he has written extensively. For such a small volume it is packed with innovative features. The chapters manage to balance narrative, debate and discussion, drawing on the latest research. Interspersed, and as duly noted, we have the 25 cameos of places deemed by Harvie to be representative of their time and context, all informed and highly entertaining. There is an excellent bibliographical essay, which cites works strong on the debates about interpretation and with modern bibliographies, and, symptomatic of Harvie's enthusiasm for cultural icons, a section on classic Scottish films.

Accompanying the text are many judiciously selected illustrations and several excellent maps (made slightly crowded by the smallish format, it has to be said). It is also beautifully designed and produced, and must be one of the few single-volume histories that can actually slip in your pocket (handy for that long train journey?). So on these and other counts this is a splendid book which entertains as well as informs.

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