

REVIEW: A PHOTOHISTORY OF THE SCOTS

Christopher Harvie

Murray MacKinnon and Richard Oram, **The Scots: a Photohistory**,
London: Thames and Hudson, 2003, 224 pages; hb, £24.95, ISBN 0500
511357.

Some initial qualification is required: 'Scotland in Sepia: a Photohistory 1840-1940' would probably have been a more accurate title, as the narrative ends before the takeover of the Leica miniature camera and colour processing. So it is Scotland prior to the era of **Picture Post** and **Illustrated** and the high-quality contributions of the daily press, familiar in particular through weel-kent **Herald** albums. Still, MacKinnon and Oram's opus is a remarkable achievement in quality of reproduction and lucidity of text, and deserves a hearty welcome and a big sale. Divided into six sections – people, places, coastal and rural life, work and industry, transport, sport and leisure – it draws heavily on the personal collection of Murray MacKinnon, and for this reason many of the images are unfamiliar. It is also aesthetically – rather than documentarily – driven (there are substantial gaps: nothing on religion, education, politics, folk-customs, entertainment) but the outcome is impressive enough to suggest a new angle on Scottish cultural development.

Richard Oram's historical text is lucid, concise and realistic; there are a few minor inaccuracies but these do not diminish its impact, which parallels a Scots scene unsentimentally presented in the photographs. Many of these are strikingly beautiful and must be ranked as a major contribution to the national artistic tradition. In fact, MacKinnon seems to have played the part

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of a William Burrell in amassing a collection quite as remarkable for its artistic value as for its documentary information. We have for rather too long accepted the 'story' that after the initial triumphs of Hill and Adamson the Scots' contribution to the new art stagnated. Look at the study of Aberdeen (1890) on p.36 with the form of the Wallace statue looming over a boy delivering milk, the cans suspended from a yoke round his neck, and you get a dialogue of ideas and images which in its complexity and ultimately tragic quality is rare enough in the painting of the time.

There are, in technical terms, gaps. There is not much information – and that rather incidental – on the development of photography in Scotland, the adoption of new equipment and techniques, the major firms, photographers (amateur and professional) and so on. Nor is there any guidance on further reading on this topic. There ought to be, because in post-Raeburn and Wilkie Scotland (Wilkie died in 1841, only 2 years before the Hill-Adamson partnership), photography arguably propelled painting forward with results which ultimately eclipsed the more 'advanced' medium. Hill and Adamson's calotypes are world-famous, but the prints in MacKinnon and Oram suggest a further narrative. For example, Sir John Lavery, the most dynamic of the Glasgow Boys, started his career as a photographer in Glasgow in 1873, and the medium influenced him throughout his career, from 'The Tennis Party' (1886) to 'Casement on Trial' (1916), and indeed the famous portrait of his wife Hazel as Kathleen ni Houlihan which became on its banknotes the most prominent image of the Irish Free State.

The same mixture of technology-derived effects and visual composition can be seen in Quinton Pringle, James Guthrie and D. Y. Cameron and, by contrast, in the move towards decorative formalism and pure tonal values in Ferguson, Peploe, Cadell and Hunter, the Scots colourists of the 1900s. Likewise, the 'industrial muse' – the frameworks, gearwheels, cylinders and stark surfaces – were to have their effect on Muirhead Bone and later on Eduardo Paolozzi.

As it stands, this is a fine contribution to Scottish historical documentation. It would be even better if the authors could issue a small 'Companion to Scottish Photography', which the reader could carry while surveying this gallery, giving some of the information referred to above, which could become an essential companion of forays round local museums and galleries, antique shops and flea-markets. There is, surely, much more to come!

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