

REVIEW: STATES OF SCOTLAND

Martin Steven

Kenneth Roy (ed.), **States of Scotland 2004**, Glasgow: ICS Books, 2003,
190 pp, hb, £18.00, ISBN 0 9546527 1 1.

States of Scotland 2004 is an edited volume of twenty-one essays which focuses on how the many different aspects of Scottish society are now 'faring', post-devolution. The contributions are written by prominent individuals in each of the various areas of Scottish life discussed, and have been gathered together by the Institute of Contemporary Scotland, the Glasgow-based 'think tank' which laudably advocates the need for a 'new Scottish Enlightenment'. The range of topics which the different chapters address make for some fascinating reading, and the premise that they all start from is innovative – each contributor tries to sum up the 'state' of their own professional area since devolution, and the subsequent 'new politics' of Scotland. The book is enjoyable to dip in and out of – one can choose an essay depending on mood – and there are some original ideas and visions for the nation to be mulled over, and debated. Furthermore, while the book has been inspired by the new Parliament, it is not solely a 'political book', and should appeal to anyone who has an interest in the multifarious aspects of Scottish civic society.

Opening chapters on the 'Estates of Scotland' are followed by sections on the Scottish media, prominent Scottish political issues, the Scottish environment and Scottish culture – a thoughtful and logical structure. In particular, the contributions in part three of the book on the issues of race, sectarianism and mental health by Rowena Arshad, Fred Shedden and Norma Bennie respectively are very worthwhile, and the idea that we should look at the political issues of modern Scotland as well as the political institutions is to be

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welcomed. Indeed, there could have been more essays like these. In his preface, the editor, Kenneth Roy, notes that the book is not intended to be comprehensive, and that there was insufficient space for chapters on science and music, for example, yet there are two on the media (one on journalism and one on broadcasting, included under the heading 'The way we see ourselves'). That having been said, it is the twin 'big hitters' of the Scottish press that feature in this section – Harry Reid and Magnus Linklater – and their thoughts are, as one might expect, insightful and wise. In particular, Linklater's dissection of the quality (or lack thereof) of the daily output of BBC Radio Scotland is extremely entertaining to read, and one hopes somebody somewhere is listening (to Linklater, that is, not to Radio Scotland).

Following on from this, there was perhaps a slight problem in parts four and five of the book with a lack of 'big names'. This is not to say the contributions here are not well made, and indeed, what comes through universally is the relish with which many of the writers offer their views – one felt much had been got off many chests. But the most enjoyable pieces are the ones where you really care about what the writer thinks, e.g. Professor Robert Black discussing the state of Scots Law, R. D. Kernohan looking at the state of Scottish religion, John McAllion providing a frank, insider's look at the state of the Scottish Parliament. Professor Gavin Reid's analysis of the state of the Scottish economy is a particularly good read – he provides an engrossing historical account of Scottish business, as well as practical opinions about contemporary Scottish enterprise. In many ways, the effectiveness of this type of book is directly proportional to the level at which one is interested in the views of the writers expressing them – unfairly or not. That having been said, discovering that Jim Delahunt in the written form is the same as Jim Delahunt presenting Scotsport on a Monday night was quite amusing – an original choice, but I hope he won't mind me saying that perhaps a Graham Spiers or a Bob Crampsey might have been more used to pontificating about the current state of Scottish sport.

Another minor criticism concerns style. While this may seem a rather superficial point, the cover and title are fairly unimaginative – there are no photographs anywhere – and, generally, there is something distinctly old-fashioned about the book, something a little bit staid. In his preface as editor, Kenneth Roy expresses his surprise that no such publication existed before this one, and yet there is a sense that, in some ways, we have indeed been

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here before. The near annual output of commentaries on Scottish politics produced/edited by Gerry Hassan spring instantly to mind, while Magnus Linklater co-edited **Anatomy of Scotland** back in 1992, which took a broadly similar approach. Indeed, sometimes one gets the impression that it is almost a prerequisite that books on Scottish politics (broadly defined) adopt this sort of format. The specific remit of **States of Scotland 2004** is definitely original, but it would be wrong to suggest that the entire concept is totally without precedent.

Probably the main criticism that could be levelled at **States of Scotland 2004**, however, is its lack of over-riding conclusions. The essay at the start by Kay Carmichael makes a bold, and suitably idealistic, attempt to set the scene for what is to come, but her wide-ranging discussion of society, community and identity in Scotland is not really developed by any of the chapters which follow, whose writers very much 'do their own thing'. Furthermore, the final 'concluding essay' by Angus Peter Campbell does not really 'conclude' very much at all. The book needed Kenneth Roy or even some other 'eminence gris' to spout forth about the thoughts of the various contributors, and look to the future in the 'new Scotland'. Instead, we are left with a book on the 'state' of Scotland concluding with a chapter about the 'state' of Gaeldom. While Campbell's summation of the book's contents with Gaelic examples is undoubtedly clever, it also seems a little contrived. Towards the end of his contribution, Campbell notes that only 1% of Scots understands Gaelic – before proceeding to write his entire final paragraph in ... ahem ... Gaelic. For this reviewer (and presumably 99% of other Scots), his concluding thoughts will forever remain a mystery.

Nevertheless, **States of Scotland 2004** is another positive contribution to the ever-growing literature on Scottish politics. While some of the writers refer to the problem of effectively trying to sum up the state of their respective area in such a short space, the aspiration of its editor that the book becomes an annual publication is credible. If this indeed becomes a reality, it will be intriguing to read **States of Scotland 2005**.

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