

## **REVIEW: MODERN SCOTLAND**

*Ian Donnachie*

Richard J. Finlay, **Modern Scotland 1914-2000**, London: Profile Books, 2004, 436 pp, hb, £20, ISBN 1 86197 299 7.

Richard Finlay will be well known to readers of this publication for his study of Scottish politics and the Union since 1880 and for other works on modern Scottish history, particularly dealing with politics and national identity. So, given his attention to Scotland in the twentieth century, both in his research and his teaching, he is well placed to produce such a volume. Doing so for the general reader as well as the student and academic market, however, is a tall order.

As I recently observed in reviewing<sup>1</sup> Chris Harvie's **Scotland: A Short History**, the market for Scottish history has become somewhat crowded of late, no bad thing overall, since it shows the vibrancy of research and writing on the subject. While Harvie described his book as a 'dwarf', Finlay's is a giant by comparison. Finlay therefore has some advantages over Harvie in the space he can deploy in a much narrower time-frame and a range of themes immediately germane to the period. This does not make the task any easier because the twentieth century was one of unprecedented political, social and economic change in Scotland and in comparison to England there is something of a research deficit in some fields.

The implications of this for Finlay were that, having realised that there were many gaps in the story which could not be filled by the existing literature, he soon abandoned his plan to produce a synoptic history of Scotland since

---

*Ian Donnachie is Reader in History at The Open University and co-author (with George Hewitt) of the **Collins Dictionary of Scottish History**, London: HarperCollins, 2003.*

<sup>1</sup> *Scottish Affairs, no. 51*

*Review: Modern Scotland*

1914. Instead he undertook new research in original sources and the result is much fresher than one that is simply a review of the work of other historians. A great variety of these sources, including many literary ones, inform and enliven the text throughout. There are no footnotes, and, given the potential readership, one can understand why that decision was taken, but it is still frustrating to be denied the actual source of this or that particular quote or piece of information. However, with that said, there are numerous references in the text, as well as an extended bibliographical essay, set out thematically, which is handy for reasons explained below.

**Modern Scotland** is organised chronologically, each chapter being devoted to obvious historical periods into which most would divide this shortened century. Within each individual chapter the major themes are explored, with some stretching backwards or forwards, giving a good sense of continuity over time and allowing for detailed explanation of the links between major events or developments. Thematic treatment of, say, politics, however, is problematic, though, using the sub-headings and index, it's perfectly possible to get a continuous narrative over time. Of course some chunks in the slices of time lend themselves to this approach better than others.

Inevitably, given Finlay's interests, politics and nationalism occupy a great deal of space here. The major players in the nationalist debates as well as the politicians, include all the usual suspects, from Kirkwood and Lloyd George on p. 1 to Dewar and Sheridan on p. 392. They are certainly a mixed bunch: for Harvie there were no Gods and precious few heroes to be found in twentieth century Scotland; for Finlay they are all guilty men (exceptionally few women, since they were marginalised, even in public life). The politicians are lumped with the industrialists and the civil servants for their lack of vision and culpability of failure in the modernisation of Scotland during much of this period.

For all the space devoted to politics and politicians, one wonders how important they were and if they really made any difference. In 1914, 1919, 1931, 1939, 1945, 1951, 1966, 1979 or whenever, they all operated in the context of their time, and the times were invariably driven by the economy. And that was a problem for Scotland long before 1914, far less since. The structure of the economy, the inertias, the impact of vast impersonal forces and events internationally, militated against change. The economy during two world wars, the slump, and post-1945 reconstruction remained essentially dependent on the old traditional industries and efforts at diversification into

### *Scottish Affairs*

new sectors were of limited success. Until the 1940s few politicians, industrialists or bureaucrats understood even the basic mechanics of the economy. It took an American engineering consultant in 1929 to point out that the only future for Scottish steel was an integrated tidewater plant on the Clyde, a project still being debated (with little more understanding it seems) in the 1960s.

The social cost of early success then long term decline was huge. It is catalogued in great detail by Finlay: the poor housing, health, and gross inequalities between classes, and the efforts of those who fought for change. That the change was so long coming says more about the persistence of the reformers than the intractability of the economic problems Scotland faced. After 1945 there were many failures of nationalisation, government intervention and direction which gave state control a bad name, and in the longer-term did little or nothing for the Scottish economy. Of course there were many success stories, in welfare, health, housing, the New Towns, and industrial estates, and the standard of living generally by the 50's and 60s had greatly improved. But again Scotland was relatively disadvantaged compared to many parts of the south.

Finlay devotes the closing chapters here to describing the rapid changes that followed; the collapse of the mainstays of the old economy, coal, iron and steel, engineering, shipbuilding, textiles, indeed, of much of Scottish manufacturing. Although it had always operated in the international economy, Scotland, as Finlay explains, had always been an essentially low wage economy, but this competitive advantage was being quickly eroded with the rise of new economies globally. Worse still the failure to invest in new technologies meant the much of the skill base was outdated and hard to update. Governments struggled to rectify matters, and up to a point had some success, though it was a slow business. If all of this suggests much gloom and doom, there is a great deal that is optimistic emerging from this discussion, and Finlay does his best to accentuate the positive aspects of Scottish life and culture throughout.

Inevitably one's left asking oneself what Finlay's book offers that others (including his jointly edited effort with Tom Devine) do not? The coverage is very impressive indeed, the major events and personalities firmly rooted in the narrative.

The treatment of recent history, always tricky as authors have lived through the period they are describing, draws on the most up-to-date research and

*Review: Modern Scotland*

data, is extremely well done and is sensitive to possible bias. A mass of invaluable statistics are made user-friendly (no tables, off-putting for most students and usually for the general reader), thoroughly described and explained in text. Some of this will be familiar to readers of this journal but as a general history, **Modern Scotland** is excellent. It is carefully pieced together, refreshingly inter-disciplinary in its coverage, and very well written. It should certainly be prescribed reading for every Scottish politician and civil servant because, for me, it explains more clearly than most others of its kind exactly why Scotland is the way it is at the beginning of the 21st century.

*July 2004*