

REVIEW: SCOTS ON THE MAKE

Chris Harvie

David Stenhouse, **On the Make: how the Scots took over London**,
Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2004, 240 pp., hb, £12.99, ISBN:
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I

Of late the initials RAE have come to have an ill-favoured sound: 'Recycle and Excrete' maybe: dour jargon-clotted chunks of social science, formidably footnoted, churned out to convince bureaucratic bean-counters, while the fusion of teaching and research which should mark the working seminar goes to hell. At the same time, in Scotland, the rambling, shambling headquarters of the BBC has started to cultivate the real thing. We have had Douglas MacLeod's **Morningside Mata Haris** on the weird world of Caledonian counter-intelligence, Peter Aitchison's tour-de-force of local history **Children of the Sea**, and now we have David Stenhouse on 'crouse London Scotties in their braw shirt-fronts' – as his subjects appear at the beginning of MacDiarmid's 'Drunk Man'. Not many footnotes, but lots of discoveries, speculations and ideas, in the tradition of the greatest of them, J K Galbraith's **The Non-Potable Scotch** of 1962.

If we do not do it, someone will do it to us. **How the Scots took over London** is a more solid piece of work than Jeremy Paxman's disorganised and over-anecdotal **The English**, and more sober in its conclusions than the final rant of Simon Schama in his *soi-disant* **A History of Britain**, with its hoodoo of autonomous nationalities butchering each other like Yugoslavia. 'Scots Raj', a Paxman coinage, was nothing new, stemming from the attacks of John Kilkes in the 1960s on George III's prime minister Lord Bute, and Stenhouse goes over the well-known course, throwing in, however, new

Chris Harvie is professor of British and Irish studies at the University of Tübingen.

Review: Scots on the Make

examples, conversations and stories, and being compellingly readable throughout.

English resistance to the Scots has generally been quite legitimate, from Cromwell's opposition to the desire of the Scots to foist presbyterianism on the English in 164 to the present hostility, not confined to the Tories, to Blair-Brown forcing their New Labour agenda through by using Scots MPs, even when the subjects concerned are devolved to Holyrood. Just as relations between the three nations have shown recurrent pulses of integration and disintegration, there may be a pattern whereby the synergies of ambition, sucking the ambitious provincials in, have tended to coincide with party weakness or ideological irresolution at the centre.

II

Do not take tendency for granted, then, or attribute 'effortless superiority' to the winners: 'Aa' heids o' deapartments' *and* 'archetypal Scotch crawlers' – to cite Tom Nairn's early venture in the *genre*. Perhaps too much use is made of the unspeakable T. . . H. Crosland, a Fleet Street hack who tried to repeat ilkes's pasquinade in the early 1900s, scoring a few hits but palpably over-rotten-egging the pudding. In fact Fleet Street – and the place lies at the heart of Stenhouse's politics-media-finance-culture quadrilateral – was always disproportionately Celtic, as its rapid rise and inherent instability made it open to exotic proprietor and journalist alike, while the City hid behind breastworks of prejudice dug by dim public schoolboys.

Turn to **Punch** and the exhibition of English irritations. There is a sense in which, despite the silly racist jokes, honest Irish have always been more welcome than sly Caledonians: see Austen, Trollope or Orwell. Phil May's brilliant cartoon in which a laughing Irishman confronts Tommy Atkins, all bumfreezer and swagger-stick with ' ho shtole the cat?' and gets "'Oo stole yer bloomin' country?' is a graceful tribute to Irish humour and patience from a Yorkshire-Australian radical, worth pages of meticulous cartoons about terminally pawkie ghillies, caddies and kirk elders.

One senses that much of the Scots Raj palaver is not about the race in general but about a particular sort of glowering, sententious Public Figure whose manners have never ceased to remind the neighbourhood that he is of the Elect. Gladstone, Haig, Cosmo Lang ... 'Oh, who will rid me of this uthering Height?' shrieked Churchill on being confronted with Lord Reith. Such figures could be tolerated, since they got things done – though

Scottish Affairs

Stenhouse is oddly unforthcoming about World War I, when West Coast businessmen like Bonar Law, William Reid, Joseph McLay and the workers of the Clyde Munitions District probably did save Britain. Less bearable were the hangers-on, the Sir Pertinax MacSycophants, the drones who camped out under the shade of the Great. Say what you will, pro and con, about Heathcliff Broon, there is nothing in the least creditable about Labour's seven transport ministers since 1997, all dismal and all but one Scots, even though transport is a devolved subject.

III

What we have is something rather new. Let me try to explain it thus. There was a long period, roughly 1922-8 when, at least politically, Scots counted for little (how many, for example figure in the **Crossman Diaries**?) But influence shifted in their favour as Conservatism under Thatcher became geographically dominant in South-East or (more discreetly) cleared out of politics altogether. As a result there was a quasi-Italianisation of Britain in which the boys from the north, our *mezzogiorno*, colonised central government in both parties – do not forget Younger, Rifkind, Lamont, Lang, MacGregor – while their smarter brethren cashed in on privatisation and its easily-available goodies.

This altered in rather a strange way after 1997. The ruling dyarchy has not just been Scots, but psychotically so, with a mental division which seems compulsive as well as cultivated, akin to the two feuding but umbilically-linked Durie brothers in Stevenson's **Master of Ballantrae**: the false charmer and the dour manager. Both Blair and Brown were from families politicised by the industrial spasms of the Red Clyde, both were given their chance by a repetition of such deindustrialisation on an all-British scale. They were aided perhaps by the 'post-industrial rebirth' of Glasgow after 1988, and certainly by the Scottish Parliament, which dumped most constituency chores on MSPs.

So while, broadly speaking, income and expenditure has been under the Chancellor while diplomacy, image, etc. rests with the Prime Minister – 'Tony survives by comforting the people Gordon annoys', in Peter Hennessy's limpid phrase – there has been a ten-year synergy between the two. Where they differ from team Bonar Law-Lloyd George, is that the latter were more competent, more visceral, and more aware of industrial and provincial society. As to the outcome, not optimistic in Stevenson? 'History repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce': thus the Good Doctor. Or as the

Review: Scots on the Make

more realistic Marx, Groucho, put it 'Let there be dancing in the streets, drinking in the bars, and necking in the parlours.' All of which synergic stuff can be done on a far bigger scale in London than in Glasgow, and press all the growth and feelgood buttons. At least for a few more months ...

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