

## **REVIEW: FIRST MINISTERS**

*Peter Lynch*

Lorraine Davidson, **Lucky Jack: Scotland's First Minister**, Edinburgh:  
Black and White Publishing, 2005, 256pp, hb, £14.99, ISBN 1-84502-  
050-2.

Wendy Alexander (ed.), **Donald Dewar: Scotland's first First Minister**,  
Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2005, 256pp, pb, £9.99, ISBN 1-84596-038-6.

Devolution has so far produced three First Ministers, each now the subject of a book. Henry McLeish published his autobiography in 2004 – part memoir, part policy agenda for devolution – and this book has now been joined by texts examining the other two First Ministers, Donald Dewar and Jack McConnell. These latter two books could not be more different however, both in terms of style and substance.

The two books share a common flaw in terms of depth and analysis. The book on Dewar deals with its subject matter in more depth, though some of its chapters are really tributes to a person rather than analyses of Dewar's time in office. In this, both books are rather disappointing to students of politics and government. The study of British politics has often focused on very traditional questions from Prime Ministerial power and cabinet government to more modern questions about the formation of core executives.

These concepts are intended to get at the key question of 'who governs?' and how do they govern – fundamental issues in politics. However, very little of that features here and much of it that does is indirect. Questions about how Dewar or McConnell run their cabinets, manage individual Ministers, relate to Westminster, etc, may seem like the minutiae of political life but they are indicators of the political styles of leaders, how they govern and who has

---

*Peter Lynch is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Politics at the University of Stirling and author of **Scottish Government and Politics** (Edinburgh University Press).*

### *Scottish Affairs*

power. In the case of the First Minister, they also open up scope for comparison between the styles of Dewar, McLeish and McConnell. These two biographies might provide some of the raw material to consider these questions, but that is as far as they go.

For the most part, the McConnell book follows a chronological narrative, though fragmented in places with key events/developments appearing out of order, which is confusing to the reader. The author's habit of referring to the book's subject repeatedly as 'Jack' also grates on the reader and demonstrates the problem when a party and political insider writes a biography.

The most obvious problem with this book is that for many readers – meaning we, the chattering classes – there is very little new ground covered or light shed on the First Minister. Most of us will recognise the main events, actors, issues, etc., and this book does not really add to them. Now, you could argue that this was intentional as the book was directed at a wider audience, but let us be honest, the people who would be interested in this book and part with some of the folding stuff to purchase it are not the general public but the politically engaged who are familiar with the contents, and sought new insights into the First Minister. Unfortunately, such insights are few and far between.

One way of reading this biography is that it is an account of the various scrapes and scandals which have affected the First Minister. Readers will be overfamiliar with these episodes and little new is added, though it does give clear credence to titling the book *Lucky Jack*, as political survival and circumstances have played a key part in McConnell's political career. A second reading of the book is its unflattering portrait of Labour in Scotland – the deals, the personalities, the local scandals, the ambition and even the feeling that they have the God-given right to run Scotland are all there in glorious Technicolor.

If there was an area worth exploring here in more depth, it is Jack the nationalist. Why did he join the SNP, why did he leave it (beyond a simple explanation that he found them too anti-English)? How does he view the SNP compared to Labour? One plus point of the book is that it portrays both Jim Sillars and Margo MacDonald as McConnell's mentors – a fascinating relationship given their position as Nationalist icons, and particularly that of Sillars who moved from the anti-devolution tract 'Don't Butcher Scotland's Future' to independence in Europe. Exploring this relationship and also its reception within Scottish Labour would have been very illuminating indeed, but this theme is under-explored.

*Review: First Ministers*

Similarly, the book could have explored McConnell's political thinking more explicitly. Part of the book examines his main policy initiatives in government as First Minister, but that really does not provide an insight into his political mind. I am not suggesting that we examine the First Minister in some elevated manner as a type of philosopher-king because Jack McConnell is certainly not that. He is not a visionary leader or ideas man or someone with his head in the great books but that does not make him a bad politician. Indeed, it might make him a good politician – one who does deals and focuses on achievable policy goals to bring about social change (even though sailing close to the wind). But, again, examining these types of issues in the book was ignored.

Whilst Wendy Alexander's book on Donald Dewar is superior to the McConnell biography in terms of its thematic layout and coherence, it would have benefited from more in-depth analysis. Too many of the chapters appear as brief pen portraits by Dewar's contemporaries, though these have the advantage of giving an insight into Dewar's personality and wit. Several chapters provide real depth and insight into Dewar the politician, especially as Secretary of State and First Minister. Fiona Ross's chapter paints a picture of a politician exhausted by the pre-devolution grind from 1997-99 in advance of becoming First Minister, whilst David Whitton's chapter assesses Dewar's political style and relationship with the media (or non-relationship) in addition to what it was like to work for the First Minister.

Peter Jones's chapter on Dewar in office is one of the longer and best chapters in the book and provides an analysis of Dewar's political achievements. This chapter has real depth in examining the Scotland Act and the issues of social inclusion, stock transfer, land reform as well as Dewar's difficulties in adjusting to life as First Minister in terms of civil service support, administrative capacity and the limited Scottish Office machinery of government. Interestingly, such features have been greatly improved since Dewar's time as successive First Minister's constructed core executives around them to support their work (not that this was mentioned in the biography of McConnell).

Whilst these chapters provide depth, some are more limited. Derry Irvine's brief chapter on the operation of the Devolution to Scotland, Wales and the English Regions cabinet committee is less than illuminating for example. We would have benefited from a fuller examination of the DSWR committee and its deliberations, though that will have to await deeper academic analysis.

*Scottish Affairs*

In contrast to the McConnell biography, this volume gives a clear sense of who Dewar was, what he thought and why. His concern for social justice as well as family involvement in the National Covenant give clear indications of the origins of his political views, as do his political experiences in Glasgow Garscadden/Anniesland. Dewar's interests in art, books and history could not make for a wider contrast with his two successors and yet it is his performance as Secretary of State and First Minister that are most important. However, here, Donald Dewar's time as First Minister was curtailed by exhaustion, illness and then death. Because of that, it is difficult to make a considered judgement about Dewar's performance as First Minister, even though some of the chapters attempt this as well as putting his political career into perspective and considering his legacy – meaning devolution itself.

*January 2006*