

## REVIEW: HISTORY OF SCOTLAND

*Michael Lynch*

Jenny Wormald (ed.), **Scotland: a History**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 380 + xx pp, hb, £25, ISBN 0-19-820615-1.

This illustrated history of Scotland encompasses the thoughts of thirteen different scholars in twelve chapters. As such, it compares favourably in terms of the quality of its coverage with the rather longer collection edited by R.A. Houston and W.W.J Knox, **The New Penguin History of Scotland: from the earliest times to the present day** (2001). Each of the authors is an acknowledged expert, but considerable effort has been exercised by the authors (or encouragement given by the editor) to write accessibly and with style. The collection is probably at its freshest in the first three chapters which cover, respectively, the period before 1100, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and late medieval Scotland. Here, in relatively short space, each chapter provides a compelling overview, attacks myths and sets out large themes. Kathleen Forsyth casts doubt on the notion of a unified kingdom of the Picts under a single king and demolishes the cherished idea of the reign of Cinaed (Kenneth mac Alpin, 839-858) as a watershed. Keith Stringer elegantly portrays the emergence between 1000 and 1300 of two separate kingdoms on the British mainland which had much in common with each other and with other realms which experienced the 'Europeanization of Europe'. The result was a sovereign nation-state which was hybrid in most of its key aspects, 'relatively loosely-jointed' but already formidable in its sense of itself. Michael Brown and Steve Boardman complete the difficult task of explaining how much the later medieval kingdom differed from its early medieval predecessor yet retained a sense of continuity with its past, seen especially in a plethora of recycled regional saints' cults and a calculated cult of chivalry.

The next five chapters, organised by the simple but generally effective stratagem of having a century each to cover, have a more difficult task since

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the problem posed by history is similar to that of the dilemma of politics, or as Harold Macmillan once complained, 'events, dear boy, events'. The chapter on 'Renaissance and Reformation' by Roger Mason is generally more interesting on the intertwining themes of the Renaissance rather than the necessary account of the complexities of Europe's last national reformation. The still more complicated seventeenth century is given lively treatment in Jenny Wormald's chapter where it is dubbed 'Confidence and Perplexity'. In the new-found confidence adroitly etched here is a key link to Mason's closing theme: the real beneficiaries of absentee kingship which followed the Union of the Crowns were those who had experienced and been educated in the new humanism; these new *noblesse de robe* aped the established aristocracy in style and spending, but are here convincingly set apart from their noble counterparts in what really mattered – their work ethic in government. If Wormald's seventeenth-century Scots 'muddled through and survived', Richard Sher's chapter on the eighteenth century saw them 'transformed'. The Enlightenment, although necessarily treated in short space, is perceptively summed up in three linked components: formal learning, best seen in the explosion of publishing and Scotland's five universities; the dynamic 'sociability' of the male world of Scotland's literati, setting it distinctively apart from an 'English Enlightenment' if that ever existed; and a shared system of values which extended from private to public virtue.

Religion and education remain as key explanators of Ian Hutchison's treatment of 'Workshop of Empire'. Here, the range of the author's expertise, extending from politics to university education, give a chapter inevitably dominated by familiar themes a fresh look. Again, there is a linkage between past and present: knowledge of overseas markets, built up over centuries, underpinned the distinctively Scottish confidence which produced developments in banking and entrepreneurship; the speculations about improvement in the previous century made Scotland an exemplar for farming change in the nineteenth. It was, Hutchison argues, largely the distinctive elements in Scottish religion, education and culture which combined to persuade Scots and non-Scots alike of the 'remarkable success of the Scots in the nineteenth century'. The story of the 'Turbulent Century', as told by Richard Finlay, is provocative and pulls few punches: thousands of survivors of the First World War, it is likely, suffered from undiagnosed post-traumatic stress, made worse by the collapse in the inter-war years of many political and cultural values in 'an avalanche of class conflict and national self-doubt'. The Second World War initiated 'a revolution in Scottish society' yet the 1960s and 1970s, which saw the children

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of the post-war period come of age, witnessed the end of a Scotland which 'had more in common with the nineteenth century than the early twenty-first'. The extent and rapidity of the change, it is suggested, has left both contemporaries and historians at something of a loss to explain it fully. This is a useful corrective to some of the certainties of sociologists which have been highly influential in recent years or to a new wave of Thatcher apologia amongst some historians which has tried to remove her 'omni-present shadow' from centre stage. The conclusion, giving further comfort to the central ethos of the volume, is that Scotland developed differently because its political culture was different, and had long been so.

The collection is completed by two rather different chapters. In 'The Scottish Diaspora', David Armitage covers some six centuries in the space of thirty pages with verve and humour. Aggression, in the form of both capital exploitation and military imperialism, sits side by side in this Scottish story with 'invisible ethnics', willing to assimilate and eager to educate as well as proselytise. His conclusion is arresting: if Britain has lost an Empire and has yet to find another role, the Scots have in recent years been rediscovering their own role as 'a diasporic and European people'. The final chapter, 'Scotland's Stories' by Sally Mapstone, is rather different: it takes the form of a sensitive and perceptive study of the creation in literature of a sense of national origins and identity which begins with John Barbour's **Brus** (c.1375) and ends with John Knox's **History of the Reformation in Scotland** and George Buchanan's Latin **History of Scotland** (1582). Much of this has resonance today, not least the respective reputations of Bruce and Wallace, yet the positioning of the chapter is odd, without a closing section on story-telling after 1603. On the last page, one has a sense of looking back rather than forward – perhaps the perennial Scottish dilemma.

This volume in the **Oxford Illustrated** series has much to commend it. With an average of nine black and white illustrations in each chapter and eight pages of colour plates, it offers good value. The most common weaknesses of general histories by composite hands are avoided, no doubt through careful editing; there is a definite sense of continuity between one chapter and the next as well as a clear and coherent structure. Yet, without playing the reviewer's game of discussing what is not in a one-volume history of Scotland and should have been, there are gaps or themes passed lightly over: both Burns and Hume receive three passing mentions, whereas Sir Walter Scott has no entry in the index. That said, this is a fine achievement, by both individual contributors and by its editor, who deserves high praise. If either a student or a general reader

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wanted to get the most accessible and most up-to-date treatment of Scottish history in a single volume, this arguably is the book to take off the shelf.

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