

REVIEW: ORAL HISTORY

Lynn Jamieson

Graham, A., **Skipness: Memories of a Highland Estate**, Edinburgh: Canongate, £12.50, pb, 1993, ISBN 1898410038, 161pp.

Hewitson, J., **Tam Blake & Co: The Story of the Scots in America**, Edinburgh: Canongate, £14.99, hb, 1993, ISBN 0862414326, 304pp.

MacDougall, I., **'Hard work, ye ken' Midlothian Women Farmworkers**, Edinburgh: Canongate, Flashbacks No.2, £7.99, pb, 1993, ISBN 1898410054, 112pp.

Slee, D. **Two Generations of Edinburgh Folk**, Edinburgh: Canongate, Flashbacks No.1, £7.99, pb, 1993, ISBN 1898410046, 80pp.

Wilkinson, R., **Memories of Maryhill**, Edinburgh: Canongate, £9.99, pb, 1993, ISBN 1898410100, 176pp.

Each of these books makes a contribution to our understanding of the past. All are handsomely illustrated with photographs. The Flashbacks series is described by its general editor, Alexander Fenton, as 'an exercise in oral history' in which every individual can add to historical knowledge. The first two volumes indeed provide a good demonstration and will be a useful supplement to more general social history texts for school pupils or students. The Flashback volumes are sponsored by the European Ethnological Research Centre, and would presumably otherwise cost more than their £7.99 cover price. If this seems like a lot for under 100 pages, remember that only respectable sales are likely to bring the price of future such volumes down. Wilkinson's work is biographical, attending as much to the conventions of a progressive narrative as to the everyday detail of oral history. He tells us of a

*Lynn Jamieson is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology, Edinburgh University. Her most recent book (with Claire Toynbee) was **Country Bairns: Growing Up 1900-1930** (Edinburgh University Press).*

Oral History

both remarkable and ordinary childhood in respectable working-class Glasgow. Graham, on the other hand, is the son of laird writing a historical tribute to his family estate, rather than a biography. His style is eclectic, relying on a variety of past records and folklore, as well as his own recollections; scholars and general readers alike may have to sift for items of interest. Hewitson's story of Scots in America is unashamedly anecdotal but his book clearly reflects some scholarly effort. In addition to liberal use of other authors, he generated an extensive correspondence with Scots interest groups in the USA as well as historical societies, libraries and museums.

Two Generations of Edinburgh Folk is an account of the childhood, young adulthood and family life of Grace, born 1899, and her daughter, Dorothy, born 1928. Grace was a baker's daughter brought up with her six brothers and sisters in Edinburgh's Stockbridge. At age 24 she gave up her job as a shop assistant when she married a railwayman, who had come to work in Edinburgh from Northumberland. Dorothy was the third of their three children. Dorothy's own story includes a description of her evacuation and that of other pupils of London Street primary school to St Andrews during the Second World War. This readable 60-page text details many (but not all) aspects of every day lives which spanned two World Wars, and allows comparison across generations. It will be of particular interest to those who know Edinburgh.

The second volume in the Flashback series has collected together the accounts of four women connected with Midlothian farming. In Scotland, unlike England, women remained a significant proportion of workers on dairy and arable farms right into this century. Two contributors describe farm childhoods, Mrs Agnes Tod, the daughter of a ploughman, and Mrs Belle Lindsay, the daughter of a grieve, both born in 1895. Mrs Tod's account includes discussion of the Scottish Farm Servants' Union and a farm workers' strike during the First World War. Mrs Lindsay tells us of her ploughing work during the war. Ploughing was regarded as a man's job, and this is a rare testimony of a woman ploughing. She also remembers her feeling that she might have had an easier life in domestic service, the only alternative employment open to her. The other contributors also describe their hard physical toil as young women. Mrs Jessie Landalls, a miner's daughter from Dalkeith, born 1909, worked for the 'tattie merchant', planting, lifting, riddling and bagging tatties. As Fenton notes, her contribution provides insight into the life of a Midlothian town 'including the importance of the pawn shop in the weekly struggle for food, the lodging house that catered for immigrant workers, the town dairies with their byres, and the excitement of surreptitiously laying hold of one of the boss's hens or an extra pocketful of

Scottish Affairs

potatoes'. Mrs Ruth Walker's experience was more recent. Born in 1923 she worked on farms from the day she left school at 14 until her marriage, returning to farm work in 1952. It is of this later period which she writes, thus giving the reader a means of judging continuity and change in housing, duties and conditions for women farm workers. She was not attracted by any other employment (little else existed) and spiritedly concludes: 'I've no regrets about working on the farms'. The volume editor, Ian MacDougall, provides scholarly footnotes and a useful map showing each farm and location mentioned by the contributors. This was my personal favourite and would make a good present for anyone interested in the history of rural life.

At first I was wary of Roderick Wilkinson's **Memories of Maryhill** fearing a scunner from too big a helping of the present day philosophy served with his reminiscence of the past. Obviously memory is not a simple faithful recording, but I like to try to separate what people believe that they were thinking 'then', at the time of the remembered past events, from what they think about these events 'now'. The historian in me is always more interested in the former, but Mr Wilkinson seemed interested in the latter. However, his commentary is contained, and the book settles down into a lively autobiographical narrative. He was born in 1917. His mother brought in money by cleaning other people's houses and his father was a shipwright then working at Rosyth Naval Dockyards but often unemployed. Maryhill was a very respectable working-class area of Glasgow and neighbours typically avoided this misfortune, as did most of Mr Wilkinson's relatives. The author describes the effect of the neighbours' polite enquires about his father's work, and that of the relatives' accusing visits, on his own and the household's morale. His biography takes us with humour through childhood comics, school, religion, hospital, the Means Test man, the Boys Brigade, employment as an office boy in a marine engineering works, his discovery of Jazz, his early efforts as a writer and a musician, and finally soldiering in the Second World War.

Angus Graham's **Skipness** is an obsessive labour of love which details encyclopedically everything that he could find to say about his family's estate with its mansion, castle and associated village on the elbow of Kintyre. He was born himself in 1892 and brought up in Skipness until going to boarding schools then university, as was normal for his sex and class at that time. Training and working as an archaeologist in later life predisposed the author's account more towards ancient and physical features than the sociological. 'Living in the House' is my favourite chapter because it focuses more on everyday social interaction of the time.

Oral History

Jim Hewitson's **Tam Blake & Co.: The Story of the Scots in America** is clearly the most ambitious of the undertakings reviewed here, but the author dampens scholarly expectations and excites others with the following introductory words: 'Working on a broad canvas is a style with which I am most comfortable. The search was for good stories and relevant background. Major topics, such as slavery and the Mormon Church regrettably are touched upon only lightly, simply providing a framework on which the Scottish anecdotes can be displayed. I hope the bibliography will enable anyone who wishes to pursue particular aspects of this remarkable and inspiring story to do so with relative ease.' The subsequent pages tell stories of the contribution made by Scots to the settlement of every area to become a state of the USA. We learn that there were Scots on both sides in the American War of Independence, with the 'Ulster Scots' making the most significant contribution on the side of the patriots. Scots also fought on both sides in the Civil War with ex-Confederate Army veterans of Scottish descent founding the racist and murderous Klu Klux Klan. Clearly as the Scots contributed to the making of white ruled USA, in equal measure they contributed to the displacement and death of indigenous people. Early Scots settlers were hardly less likely to be murderers and traitors to native Americans than other Europeans, although chapter 9 raises the possibility of affinity between the traditions of Highland clansmen and Indian tribal hierarchy. Despite the author's disclaimers concerning 'tartan jingoism', overall in the book the 'good' Scots seem to predominate. Male Scots certainly predominate over female. This is not just a problem of source material but also a carelessness in language as there are various points in the book when a naive reader could reasonably assume that all Scots are men.

May 1994