

REVIEW: A TALE OF TWO HISTORIES

David McCrone

Christopher Harvie **Scotland and Nationalism: Scottish Society and Politics, 1707-1994** (2nd edition), London: Routledge, £12.99, pb, 1994, ISBN 0415090415, 248pp.

Richard Finlay **Independent and Free: Scottish Politics and the Origins of the Scottish National Party, 1918-1945**, Edinburgh: John Donald, £15, pb, 1994, ISBN 0859763994, 259pp.

When in 1977 Christopher Harvie published his **Scotland and Nationalism: Scottish society and politics, 1707-1977**, it was welcomed by reviewers with encomia such as 'brilliant', 'remarkable' and 'imaginative'. Its success in the field has led to a second edition published earlier this year. Its publication also coincides with a first book by Richard Finlay called **Independent and Free: Scottish politics and the origins of the Scottish National Party, 1918-1945**. Inevitably, Harvie's book has received wider publicity. Here is a historian at the height of his career, able to make telling comparisons with mainland Europe from his vantage point in Germany. Finlay's book is narrower in focus, being largely the product of his Edinburgh University PhD thesis, although he now plies his trade at Strathclyde. Its publication has hardly been noticed. There is little doubt in this reviewer's mind as to which is the more significant publication; it is Finlay's.

When the SNP abruptly pulled out from the Scottish Constitutional Convention in 1989, it drew fierce criticism. It seemed to be an act of poor politics and bad history. We may still hold to the former opinion, but Finlay's work shows that we would be mistaken in concluding the latter. His task is to trace and explain the origins and development of Scottish nationalism as a

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political movement, and in particular the processes which led to the creation of the modern SNP.

The story begins in 1918 with the re-establishment of the Scottish Home Rule Association (SHRA) under Roland Muirhead. By the early 1920s the SHRA was a major force in both the Liberal and Labour parties in Scotland, and looked as if it would carry both into setting up a home rule parliament. By the middle of the decade, however, the Scottish question was off the agenda, squeezed out by what its critics argued were 'real' politics. Running alongside the SHRA was the more sectarian Scots National League (SNL), infused with the 'celtic romanticism' of Erskine of Mar, and backed up by its journal **Scots Independent**. The SNL advocated complete independence, and believed in fighting elections to achieve this. The SHRA wanted administrative devolution and limited self-government, and saw its task as a pressure group on other political parties.

The collapse of the SHRA led to the merging of these two bodies, and the creation of the National Party of Scotland (NPS). Inevitably, the NPS was created in 1928 with many contradictions. Despite the fact that the collapse of the SHRA gave the 'radicals' (fundamentalists) an advantage, Finlay argues that they were unable to exploit this, and the 'moderates', under the command of John MacCormick, got the upper hand. MacCormick's strategy was to make home rule acceptable to the establishment, and he sought to broaden its appeal. In 1930 the Scottish Party had emerged out of a breakaway by the Cathcart Unionist Association as a synthesis of nationalism and Toryism (notably under Andrew Dewar Gibb and the Duke of Montrose).

MacCormick had identified the self-government issue as the weakness of the Scottish Party (with its strong pro-Empire sentiments), and set about an amalgamation of the NPS and the Scottish Party by ridding his own party of the 'extremist' fundamentalists who believed in outright Independence. A showdown in 1933 saw their departure, and the formation of a new party, the Scottish National Party, in the same year. Despite the expulsion, the SNP encompassed too many contradictions for its own good. In Finlay's words: 'In the last analysis it has to be said that in terms of fighting for "national independence" in the normal sense of the word, the creation of the Scottish National Party was undoubtedly a regressive step' (p.154).

The SNP contained too many people, including MacCormick, who believed that it was a movement rather than a political party. Its failure to achieve even modest electoral success, coupled with deep divisions in the party over the issue of wartime conscription, led MacCormick to leave the party in 1942.

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Almost immediately, according to Finlay, the party began to increase its membership and to do well in elections, under the tutelage of Robert McIntyre and Arthur Donaldson. McIntyre's short-lived success at the Motherwell bye-election in 1945 was both the result of the capture of the party by the radicals, and the base on which the post-war party was to become a political force in the 1950s and 1960s.

Finlay argues that there were three crucial elements which gave the SNP a minimum of political identity and cohesion: a strong definition of 'self-government' (at least what the Dominions had); a strategy of fighting elections; and an insistence that party members could not belong to any other. When the party let go of some or all of these propositions (as in the late 1930s), it lost ground, and when it re-established them under the radicals like McIntyre and Donaldson, it functioned as a coherent entity, and built the foundations for its electoral success in the second half of the century.

The great value and strength of Finlay's book comes from detailed research on the personal papers and nationalist records which were available to him. He writes with clarity and with an eye for a good story. He tells it with verve and care, and it is a fine example of political history. We can understand, even if we do not agree with it, why the SNP in the 1980s and 1990s was so unwilling to do a deal with other parties on the issue of Scottish home rule. Its own history suggests strongly that becoming a movement rather than a party is very unlikely to bring about Independence, and its fear of the devolutionist home rule option has deep historical roots.

John MacCormick does not come out of the book well. Finlay gives him credit for his organisational abilities in both the NPS and the SNP, but his willingness to sup with the establishment de'il, and to defer to other routes to self-government, are weaknesses according to the author. He is more willing to give credit to Robert McIntyre and Arthur Donaldson for preparing the ground for the 1950s and 1960s breakthrough. There is a weakness here, because it all sounds too straightforward as an explanation. What is lacking from internalist political histories of this sort is an understanding of how the political and social environments were changing. It would be churlish to criticise the author for not doing this, given the immense task he has done on the history of the party.

Harvie's book does not neglect the big picture nor the long time-span. When he published **Scotland and Nationalism** in 1977 it was an instant and important success. It has, however, not travelled particularly well into its 1994 edition. Harvie's is a cultural history of Scotland since the Union which

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shows the particular skill and learning of the author. Most of the chapters are largely unchanged, although the latter parts of chapter 6, and a new chapter 7 'The Twenty Years' Conflict', bring it up to 1994. The latter is a particular disappointment. Devoting less than 5 pages to Thatcherism and Scottish Toryism (why 'Rifkindism' and not 'Youngerism?') is a mistake, given their centrality to any understanding of Scottish politics. To be fair, authors are frequently under pressure to make only minimal changes to re-editions, but authors have the right to refuse. Oddly, the last paragraph of the book is almost the same as that for the 1977 edition. The earlier edition commented that unless constitutional change was effected in Britain there might be a 'descent into the reassertion of activistic loyalties and possibly into violence' (p.287). The 1994 edition warns that the same outcome may arise should the European project fail (p.219). As a reasoned conclusion, this won't do. Perhaps authors should set their faces against re-editions, which are too often could kail rehet. Books are creatures of their time and place, which capture the moment. In this respect, Richard Finlay has written for 1994.

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