

## **REVIEW: THE SEARCH FOR SCOTTISH HISTORY**

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Colin Kidd **Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish whig historians and the creation of an Anglo-British identity, 1689-c.1830**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, £35.00, hb, ISBN 052143484 X, 322pp.

Perhaps it is unfair to judge it as such, but Colin Kidd has not produced a book on national identity. In terms of what is implied, only half of his subtitle is accurate. This book however is an important contribution to our understanding of eighteenth-century Scottish historiography, and it is a most impressively researched and powerfully argued one; but in capturing the essence of identity in Scotland, the jury must remain out.

What Kidd has done is to take his lead, in part, from Marinell Ash's **The Strange Death of Scottish History** (1980), to explain the absence of a fully blown romantic nationalism in the nineteenth century, one that 'should' have mirrored 'nation-states' elsewhere in Europe. This he has done by an interpretation of the writing of Scottish history between the 1688-9 revolution and the early nineteenth century. Ultimately the link he is testing is of that between liberty and nationhood in Scotland, their conjunction supporting potential nation-statehood. The failure of the two to be linked in the nineteenth century was, Kidd argues, a reflection of a Scottish historiography which over the period increasingly associated liberty with English not Scottish history.

Kidd works on the assumption that it was history, derived from Scripture, rather than political ideology, which structured political argument in early modern Scotland (p.27). He argues that there was, as it were, 'enough' history of Scotland to stoke the fire of nationalism. Scotland's past provided

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sufficient material for a national origin myth, through either antiquity of settlement or the 'proof' of an independent Scottish foreign policy as part of the legendary league of King Achaius with Emperor Charlemagne in the ninth century (p.27). Thus Scots whigs in 1689 possessed all the ideological ingredients out of which European intellectuals a century and a half later were to create nationalist movements; yet they did not.

In common with other nationalist movements, an important part of the battle between English and Scottish whig historians was over the 'original' independence of their respective kingdoms. Kidd explains that the Fergusian legend, a belief established since the fourteenth century of the foundation of the Scottish monarchy under Fergus MacFerquhard in 330BC, was central to the early Scottish historiography in this period. The Scottish whig historian Thomas Craig, for example, argued that since England only received the feudal law at the Norman Conquest, this made false any notion of prior feudal suzerainty over Scotland, so defending Scotland's independent past by undermining the ancient English constitution at its weakest point (p.44-5). In contrast, English whig historians such as William Atwood denied Scotland's historical independence, suggesting that the 1707 agreement did not have the full status of a treaty between sovereign nations (p.73).

This debate over the historiographical status of Scotland as it entered the Union of 1707 is an important one, especially in connection to the Wilkite Scottophobia of the 1760s. Although the response of the Scottish whig historians to Wilkes is not explored, what Kidd does tell us is that the Union failed to be accompanied by any immediate ideological consensus within whig historiography. He argues that there was no real attempt to build a bridge between the Scottish and English political nations to create a common British 1689-revolution culture in the first half of the eighteenth century. Despite a few exceptions, generally both Scottish and English whigs proved resistant to the concept of 'British' history (p.71). This has important implications in the history of British nationalism in this post-Colley world (Colley 1992). The generally smooth path to Britishness which Colley implies is perhaps not so straightforward. That Kidd has not explored the implications of his research to this debate is, however, to be regretted.

Whether or not there were the beginnings of an all-pervasive sense of British national identity in the second-half of the eighteenth century is a crucial historiographical battleground. Kidd argues that pre-1745 British patriotism was unable to do more than scratch at the roots of historical national consciousness, that it was modern and fragile in comparison with both Englishness and Scottishness. While there was no wider British identity,

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within Scottish historiography there was, Kidd contends, an increasing sense that the freedoms of Scotland post-1707 were built on the back of the 1689 revolution, essentially a corner-stone of English liberty. After mid-century, traditional Scottish whiggism ended along with the Jacobite threat. Importantly, Kidd argues, the removal of this friction between Scotland and England prompted Scottish whig historians to re-assess their feudal past. Fired-up by the demystification of Fergusianism by Father Thomas Innes, and completed by the sociological whigs of the Enlightenment, for the Scottish literati Scottish history became irrelevant (p.97). The revolution of 1689 was regarded as incomplete in Scotland (not England), and the 1603 Union of Crowns remained a perceived threat to Scottish liberties. By the end of the eighteenth century the decades since 1707 were reinterpreted as a discrete break from a feudal past involving the absorption of Scotland within an English history which had catapulted Scotland almost a century ahead in its constitutional development. As Kidd sums up late-eighteenth century historiography, Scottish history pre-1707 could not explain the present; the long sweep of English history could. Subscribing to this interpretation, Scotland's literati rendered their native country history-less. England represented modernity rather than a dominant core. English history became the basis of British whig identity, but subject to a 'quality control' check from Scotland's literati (pp.209-212).

Hence Kidd's interestingly contradictory term 'Anglo-British', generally understood to mean the same thing in any typology as *English* national identity. Kidd argues that North Britishness was a Scottish version of English whig identity, based on a commitment to English constitutional history. North Britishness involved the appropriation of English whig materials in an attempt to construct a more inclusive and properly British whig historical culture, fitting a partnership in Empire (p.214-5). But we must be clear that this is historical, not national, identity which Kidd is referring to, and there is a clear gap in Kidd's narrative between the historiography and a wider Scottish identity.

The wholesale acceptance by historians and literati of the deconstructive criticism initiated during the Scottish Enlightenment was to weaken the benefits of the early nineteenth century organisational revolution in Scottish historiography (p.255), such as the Maitland and the Bannatyne Clubs which took so much of their inspiration from Sir Walter Scott. Although this begs the question as to the original appearance of these clubs in the first place, Kidd's suggestion that the Enlightenment pulled intellectuals away from Scotland as inspiration is important for the development of Scottish historiography.

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As Kidd's argument comes full circle it is clear that he believes that there was no paradox of failure of romantic nationalism in the nineteenth century. The crisis of Scottish historiography was more than just partial romanticism and the antiquarianism of the bibliographical clubs. Rather, he argues, by the turn of the century, the Scottish historians did have a vision of their own past, but it was one in which they were only too aware that it was the new dawn of Union and Anglicisation which had dispelled the nightmare of Scottish feudal oppression and backwardness (p.267). No better example existed, suggests Kidd, than Sir Walter Scott where the influence of the sociological whigs checked his instinctive romanticism and 'ethnic' patriotism, enabling a 'scientific' allegiance to Anglo-British modernity (p.259).

Kidd uses Sir Walter Scott because he signifies, as in Ash, furtherance of the process of historical research, but at the same time Scott failed to provide the intellectual materials to rebuild a plausible framework for an 'independent' Scottish history. An ethnocentric historical vision was out of the question for Scott, convinced of the basic validity of an Anglo-British whig historiography created by his Enlightenment predecessors (p.266). The vital heart of the nation's history had been lost - the link between liberty and nationhood. The Scottish conception of liberty had from the mid-eighteenth century become associated with the benefits of Union with England, including liberation from anachronistic feudal institutions. The communal memory of Scottish national independence did persist, but it was now impossible to detach the idea of freedom completely from the experience of Anglicisation (p.268).

Kidd has clearly filled a gap in our understanding of the intellectualising of Scottish history in the century after Union. However, while accepting the Gramscian notion of the need for intellectuals to structure our understanding of our selves (as in national identity, for example), Kidd has not linked the Scottish whig historiography to Scottish national identity. Following Crick's criticism of Linda Colley, we can say that there is a distinct lack of political theory here (Crick 1992). Kidd has detailed the relevant historiography, but he has not linked it to national identity. On the occasion where he has tried to make a connection, through the prism of Sir Walter Scott, there is the sense that Kidd is tying Scott down to an historical tradition, ignoring all other societal and political influences on his life, and ignoring also, more importantly, any influences of Scott's life on Scottish society. An analysis of Scott's historiography like the analysis of historiography in general does not reveal its impact upon those who read it. Kidd has not explained Scott's role as a figure of national identity whereas, for instance, the rhetoric which surrounded the building of the Scott monument would be more revealing. We

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need to be sure that this is Scottish national identity that is being explained, and not the history of events which happened to take place within the territorial boundary called 'Scotland' (Morris and Morton 1994); we must be aware of the many factors which create our multiple identities (Smout 1994).

This makes clear why this book fails to make its own contribution to understanding national identity, and that is why this book, despite its high scholarly standards, may receive less academic attention than its undoubted quality merits. Perhaps the irony is that it is detached from today's sociological whigs and fails to make the connection to current literature and debates. This will only be rectified if we all read it and make the links, but the danger is that Kidd's argument, lacking self-support, will become fragmented. I think the opportunity is there for Kidd to write a sequel, and for him to tell us just how important the thesis of Anglo-British Scottish historiography is for post-1745 Scottish/British national identity.

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