

REVIEW:
INDUSTRY, BUSINESS AND SOCIETY IN SCOTLAND

Robin Mackie

A.J.G.Cummings and T.M.Devine (eds) **Industry, Business and Society in Scotland since 1700**, Edinburgh: John Donald, £30, hb, 1994, ISBN 085976401X, 240pp.

This volume contains a collection of twelve articles presented to John Butt, Professor of Economic History at the University of Strathclyde, on the occasion of his retirement. In the preface, the editors highlight one feature that the articles - or rather their authors - have in common: all were undergraduate or postgraduate students of Professor Butt. One result is that the contents of much of the volume are likely to be rather familiar to him: at least half the writers have returned for inspiration to theses that he presumably supervised. As a postgraduate student myself, I would not wish to detract from such a procedure - it seems a pity for all that research to languish in a university library as 'unpublished MPhil/PhD Thesis'! But one suspects that those writers who had a different starting point found it easier to produce the sharp focus which makes the reading of such essays most enjoyable.

Inevitably, perhaps, this method of selecting contributors means that the collection is diverse. Divided into two broad categories entitled 'Industry and Business' and 'Society', contributions range from the early eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century, and from examinations of particular industries to William Sloan's article comparing the jobs occupied by Highland and Irish immigrants in Glasgow. Apart from the authors' link to Professor Butt, the main feature that the articles have in common is that they are all about Scotland. In some cases, this simply means that the locations studied are

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Scottish. Peter Clapham, for instance, looks at changing tenancy agreements in Angus between 1760 and 1850, whilst Norman Murray examines the handloom weaving industry in the East of Scotland in the 1830s (but one hopes that his description is better than his geography: Kinross in Fife? (p. 222) Dunfermline, coastal? (p.228)).

For a surprising number of the articles, however, the distinctive features of the Scottish experience of industrialization and its aftermath provide a focus to the argument. This is particularly true of those which look at the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century. The articles by Christopher Whatley, A.J.G. Cummings and Ian Donnachie give a sense of a country in the forefront of economic change. Whatley argues that historians have underestimated the growth of the Scottish coal industry in the eighteenth century and its contribution to Scotland's early industrialization. Cummings, in a fascinating article about the York Building Company, shows how the Treaty of Union created opportunities for London-based capitalists to invest in Scotland. The Company's various ventures were poorly conceived and managed and, with hindsight, were doomed to failure, but Cummings shows how 'speculation and technical development were interwoven' (p. 36) and the initiators genuinely believed in the economic potential of Scotland's natural resources. Donnachie pursues John Butt's own interests in industrial archaeology and the pioneers of the industrial revolution in his slightly breathless 'A Tour of the Works: Early Scottish Industry Observed, 1790-1825'. Using contemporary descriptions of Scotland's early factories and other industrial sites, he reveals 'the genuine wonder and enthusiasm of those who viewed at first hand the dramatic impact of industry in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Scotland' (p. 55).

How contemporaries attempted to come to terms with the consequences of those changes is the theme of two of the most thought-provoking essays in the volume. In 'Urbanisation and the Civic Response: Glasgow, 1800-1830', T.M. Devine considers how Glasgow tried to cope with the social and environmental problems of a city whose population 'was expanding faster than that of any other city of its size in western Europe' (p. 188). Devine argues that whilst the Police Act of 1800 was innovative both for establishing the principle of representation, and in terms of the regulatory powers it gave the Police Commission, the effectiveness of the reforms was ultimately limited by the Evangelical ascendancy on the city's councils. Their emphasis on individual morality and on charitable donations blunted the drive to improve the physical conditions in the city, and policing was redefined to mean simply the maintenance of public order. Stana Nenadic's article on 'Scottish Fiction and the Material World in the Early Nineteenth Century' looks at another response to the rapid changes of these years. Focusing on a

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group of widely-read Scottish novelists including Scott and Galt, she explores the significance of the representation of property, wealth and consumption in their works and how 'a form of conspicuous parsimony' (p. 178) was to become the hallmark of the Scottish middle classes' response to the new-found wealth created by industrialization.

If those writing on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries emphasize the transformation of Scotland in these years, a more defensive tone creeps into the articles on later periods. Robert Corrins, in his article on William Baird & Co., is concerned to defend the men who led the company - one of the largest and most successful enterprises in nineteenth century Scotland - from charges of entrepreneurial failure, whilst John Logan, in 'Electricity Supply, Electrical Engineering and the Scottish Economy in the Inter-War Years', chooses to accentuate the positive and emphasizes the achievements of the Scottish electricity generating industry in keeping level with its equivalent south of the border. Yet the slow growth of electrical engineering, of which Logan also writes, and in particular its failure to become more than an auxiliary to heavy industry, was surely at least of equal significance. Just as Corrins concludes that 'in the context of the time they showed drive and imagination, made rational choices and earned the profits to prove it' (p. 78), so too Logan argues that 'it is difficult to fault the Scottish electrical engineering industry' for its failure to match larger and better-placed English companies (p. 120). Yet the very desire to absolve their subjects from blame points to the downside of the familiar story of the rise and fall of Scottish industry.

Although Tom Donnelly avoids the comparison, his 'Tombstone Territory: Granite Manufacturing in Aberdeen, 1830-1914' portrays an industry whose fortunes parallel this story. Access to raw materials, a technological lead and a skilled workforce led to the growth of an export-oriented industry in the nineteenth century, whilst increasing competition and changing patterns of demand meant that 'by 1914 the industry had embarked on a downward path from which it never recovered' (p. 95). The financial sector, as Charles Munn points out in his article on the emergence of Edinburgh as a financial centre, has clearly escaped this tale of decline, and he pleads for more attention to be devoted to this aspect of economic history. It is perhaps a pity, therefore, that his coverage of the assurance and investment trust industries is so brief, since it is surely their success which has enabled Edinburgh to become the major financial centre that it is today.

The book contains an annoying number of proof-reading errors: at £30, the reader is surely entitled to expect better. But this does not detract from the value of this collection of useful and interesting essays.

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