

RECENT SCOTTISH HISTORY BOOKS*

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The year 1750 is taken for this review, because historical convention marks it as the dividing point between 'early modern' and 'modern'. The year has, unfortunately, no particular constitutional relevance for Scotland, but was at least a dividing point in the movements of economic and demographic growth.

There have been no major works on the general picture of modern political development to record, but specific areas of political history and political activity have been opened up. Alexander Murdoch's The People Above (John Donald, 1980) takes a careful look at the power structure of the mid-eighteenth century, the interlayering of politics, justice and administration. The efforts of the government in London to treat Scotland as a wayward part of England were unsuccessful, but so also were the efforts of individual Scottish politicians to ignore the balance of political power south of the Border. The Scottish governing class managed to preserve its own interests and take advantage of the relationship with England and of Britain's international position. In the language of the time, it went some way to 'complete the union', by settling for a balance between the interests of landowning society within Scotland and the identity and advantage of Britain as a whole. The study belongs in the real Namierite tradition of careful attention to the manoeuvres and priorities of a small group ('the political nation' was Namier's own phrase), and is done with some detachment.

* Books published in 1978, 1979, 1980 and the first quarter of 1981 dealing with aspects of Scottish history since 1750.

By contrast James R Young, The Rousing of the Scottish Working Class (Croom Helm, 1979) covers a large span of time, 1770-1931, containing a lot of cross currents, is about groups who aspired or failed to aspire to be regarded as part of the political nation, and does not attempt to be detached. Dr Young claims that his account is a 'committed Socialist' one, but not biased. The line between these two positions may be one that can be drawn, but it certainly has not been. Dr Young adheres to a strand of historical thought, particularly represented by E P Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class, which has claimed and identified more continuity between radical political movements and illegal working class activity than used to be admitted by historians, and some items of a similar kind can be found in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Scotland. But links of individual contact or activity are not the same as the 'roused' working class that it is claimed existed from almost the first moment that the phrase working class can be considered meaningful. Dr Young also wishes to credit his early working class with the aggressive nationalism that its twentieth century successors have sometimes shown, and because he has so early raised consciousness in class and nationalist terms - the Scottish working class by 1830 was, he asserts, 'the most class conscious and politically aware in Europe' - he is faced with a difficult task of explaining how little his workers achieved in terms of either national separateness or the redistribution of power and wealth. He finds the answer in a long list of 'baddies' in influential positions, not only the anglicized upper class but anyone at any social level who did not have as explicit a nationalism as he himself possesses. These sinister figures frustrate the simple nationalist virtue and class solidarity of the workers.

This approach to history is to be regretted. It is degrading to the common people who, at all periods and in all societies appear to have acted with independence and to have frustrated the categories laid down for them by their betters, to be forced into such a narrow doctrinal mould. The approach also vitiates the very real pioneer work that the author himself has carried out in his field. There are many problems involved in the understanding of nineteenth century working class movements - for instance the

links of Scottish Chartism with religion, the attitudes of the urban population to the immigration of labour from the Highlands and from Ireland into the towns, the adoption of the cause of the Highland crofters by the Lowland radical press, the varied allegiances to church establishment and to dissent, the pervasiveness of support for a right wing type of Liberalism and again the links of this with religion - for it to be highly desirable that someone should undertake a study of the nineteenth century with the emphasis on working class politics. But the necessity of compressing a large span of time into a small book and the dogmatic approach which confuses what did happen with what the author thinks ought to have happened, make it impossible to identify any real historical contribution here.

Twentieth century political history is sustained, or rather illustrated, by Harry McShane and Joan Smith, No Mean Fighter (Pluto Press, 1978). This is the spoken record of a leading left winger and Trade Union organiser. It is enjoyably frank about the various mechanisms by which communism was promoted on Clydeside, some of them crudely violent, others more legal and legitimate. McShane also comes clean about the extremely 'bourgeois' and anti-feminist attitudes of the early Scottish left-wingers, whose egalitarianism and socialism stopped well short of the kitchen sink. The book is a racy account of a courageous and determined life, and even though the editor, Joan Smith, has probably provided more than mere organisation of the material and probably at times acted as ghost, it stands out as the most readable of the autobiographical accounts of the Red Clyde, totally lacking in the proletarian or nationalist cant which has often been inflicted on twentieth century historiography in Scotland and which is as distasteful as nineteenth century religious cant.

These three works are the haul on the political side of historical writing. There has been nothing written on modern Scotland which can be set up in scope or detachment to measure against the massive work by Kenneth Morgan, Wales: the rebirth of the nation, 1880-1980, a book which unites political, economic, religious and social history. It seems unlikely that any such work will be produced in Scotland in the near future, for the university habit of separating off into different departments Scottish,

economic, ecclesiastical and 'other' history, and the habit of some of these departments of behaving as if history should be the scene of demarcation issues, make it unlikely that any single historian will set out to cover the different aspects of the recent past.

The apparent possibility of devolution seems to have inspired various works which lie between the areas of politics and history. Michael Keating and David Bleiman, Labour and Scottish Nationalism (Macmillan, 1979) were working in England when writing their book. It is not an inevitable result of the location that its historical dimension is limited. There is very little here on events before the twentieth century and even for the 1970s, its period of special interest, the book fails either to display the clumsiness of the Labour party machine in Scotland, the fall in membership of the party and the sharp regional differences in Scottish views on devolution. Jack Brand, The National Movement in Scotland (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), though asserting that the topic of Scottish nationalism must be looked at in the context of Scottish history, does very little to further this aim.

On the religious side the late Andrew Drummond and James Bulloch have given their names to a third volume in their church history, The Church in Late Victorian Scotland, 1874-1900 (St Andrews Press, 1978). As with the earlier volumes dogma is not ignored, but the book is more a social than an ecclesiastical history. The authors bring detachment to their cool and critical look at institutions but humanity to their social impact. In particular they refuse to be flannelled into accepting the standard Free Church hostility to the concept of establishment. Kenneth M Boyd, Scottish Church Attitudes to Sex, Marriage and the Family, (1850-1914) (John Donald, 1980) is also a work of social rather than of ecclesiastical history. Dr Boyd relies largely on statements by churchmen, in sermons and pamphlets, but is sensitive to the silences in such material and their implications. Altogether he explores the minds of ecclesiastics with considerable subtlety.

There has been one significant work in the classical area of economic history, R H Campbell, The Rise and Fall of Scottish Industry, 1707-1939, (John Donald, 1980) a survey which firmly refuses to carve up long trends into the conventional 'periods'.

This book departs from the excessive veneration often paid to the long tradition of education in Scotland. Professor Campbell sees the Scots as clever borrowers of other people's ideas, of which their intellectual training enabled them to make a rapid appreciation, and as also possessed of a genuine mechanical talent. But there was a failure of confidence and competence in the late nineteenth century, and even before the first world war the strands which merged to bring about the industrial collapse of the twentieth century can be seen by hindsight. Professor Campbell does not lay the economic failure at the door of the country's lack of self-determination, but he shows how failure put pressure on governments for more independence and for more positive economic policies. His own disbelief in the idea that the answer to an old and rigid industrial structure can lie in a different political system is clear. Scotland, he asserts, is a warning against the idea that government can eradicate deep-seated attitudes and economic traditions, but at the same time he shows a belief, somewhat inconsistent with this, in the importance of links with other parts of the developed world.

You might expect that John Scott and Michael Hughes, The Anatomy of Scottish Capital (Croom Helm, 1980) would give greater depth to Campbell's book but in fact this work does little more than furnish details to the familiar theme that money in Scotland, as elsewhere, has tended to be linked to other money, whether by business or by family bonds. Moneyed family networks have tended to exercise power less through family firms and more by their position in large scale companies, corporations and holding companies, while actual management has come to lie in the hands of professional executives. As moneyed concerns have got larger they have more and more often linked Scottish business with English. It is the picture than anyone would have expected.

There are competent special studies of two industries of wide ranging significance, A J Durie, The Scottish Linen Industry in the Eighteenth Century and Ian Donnachie, A History of the Brewing Industry in Scotland (both John Donald, 1979). In the eighteenth century these were industries of considerable rural significance. Brewing went on to function on a larger and urban scale in the nineteenth century while linen lost ground to cotton. As might be

expected from converted doctoral theses, neither book ventures far into the social dimensions of the industry concerned.

M W Flinn (ed) Scottish Population History from the Seventeenth Century to the 1930s (Cambridge University Press) in fact came out in 1978 though it carries the date 1977. Though this book uses no very advanced techniques of demographic analysis it is important for its understanding of the close relationship between social and demographic change. For the modern period it suggests that there may be considerable similarities between the demographic history of Scotland and England, but with particular aspects of mortality at an enhanced level in Scotland. It also shows the special problems induced in the Highland region by poverty and migration.

The great bulk of new historical writing lies in the field of social history. Some of this is in the traditional field of the activities of favoured elite groups, people with money or intellect. Marinell Ash, The Strange Death of Scottish History (Ramsey Head Press, 1980) is a slight but enjoyable essay on nineteenth century historiography, examining the motivation and activities of the early publishing clubs which have made an important range of primary sources available, and from there proceeding to discuss the strands of nationalist and religious obscurantism, which made it difficult for any Scottish historian frankly to review any section of Scottish post-Reformation history. It is another reminder that there is very little difference in the anti-intellectual achievements of the two motives, piety and national vanity. Olive Checkland Philanthropy in Victorian Scotland (John Donald, 1980) lays out the various enterprises and good works of the nineteenth century, but is more an institutional narrative than a work of modern social history for it does not go into either the difficult area of assessment of the material efficacy of these good works in reducing the social evils which they confronted, or into the social ambience of the people who participated in the work.

Specialized studies of short periods, limited regions or specific social groups form the bulk of publications in the new social history, and altogether they are an invigorating bunch. A leading example is Kenneth J Logue, Popular disturbances in Scotland, 1780-1815 (John Donald, 1979). The original inspiration of this investigation into the distribution and function of riot as a

mechanism for the transmission of public opinion is admitted to lie in studies by E P Thompson and George Rudé of the actions of the crowd in eighteenth and early nineteenth century England, but since there were issues in Scotland which could create disturbance and which were not all shared with England it would be a mistake to regard this book as simply a widening of the English field of study. In particular the Scottish pattern of religious riot was not, as was the English, one of support for the established church but was linked with the long-standing popular evangelicalism that had sustained its grip on many Scottish congregations throughout the eighteenth century. Patronage in the church was resented by this tradition, and many sections of society below the landowning class were prepared to unite in resistance to what came to be labelled 'intrusion'. Though Scots in the eighteenth century provided a disproportionate share of the British army, those who did not volunteer for this career had a dislike of conscription into the militia, and this caused widespread riot in 1797. In the nineteenth century the most striking form of popular émeute in Scotland was to be the resistance to clearance in the Highlands, but much of this lies outwith the time limits of the doctoral study on which the book is based.

A major landmark in techniques of social history, and one not deriving any impulse from English historiography, is I Levitt and T C Smout, The State of the Working Class in Scotland in 1843 (Scottish Academic Press, 1979). This book relies on the fact that the Royal Commission set up to investigate the working of the Old Scottish Poor Law in the 1840s had benefitted from progress in the ideas of statistical information, and made a thorough and quantifiable investigation into basic facts such as diet, wages and amenity. The authors have analysed the material of the report geographically with the impressive result that, for one year at least, we can assess and compare the material standards of life in different areas.

There are two commendable studies of particular working groups, Norman Murray, The Scottish Handloom Weavers, 1790-1850: A Social History (John Donald, 1978) and Alan B Campbell, The Lanarkshire Miners (John Donald, 1979). The decline of the weavers into poverty and degradation is a well known story, but it is useful to have

it signposted, and here also it is related to the rise of theft, prostitution and disorder in the west of Scotland. These social features cannot easily be quantified, and are not: another limitation of the book is the separation of the world of trade unions and radical activities from its narrative of the inexorable decline into poverty, as if the two aspects were not in any way related. Campbell's book on the miners is subtitled 'A Social History of their Trade Union 1775-1974' but the 1974 of the title page seems to be a misprint for 1874. The book is a good deal more than this, for it looks at the general transition of the mining community from the serfdom of the eighteenth century to an apparently freer position, and at the efforts of the mining companies to achieve general social control over their miners. There was a long struggle resulting from this over the existence of Trade Unions and over restrictions on output. The book is sensitive and intelligent, using its material critically, aware of, but cautious in the use of, modern sociological concepts. It is less concerned with the material conditions of life than is Murray on the weavers, and more with the aspirations, organisations and corporate techniques of the workers. Here at last is a cool look at the priorities of a section of the working class. The limitation of this humane and fascinating book is its concentration on the world of the adult male worker, to the neglect of the women and children who not only formed the greater part of the mining community but who, for the first half of the period covered, also worked in the mines. We see the miners in their trade unions but not in their homes.

Sociology, imaginatively used, also informs Ian Carter, Farm Life in Northeast Scotland, 1840-1914: the Poor Man's Country (John Donald, 1979), another work with too much subtitle. Carter is by training a sociologist, but has added a sensitive understanding of the culture and economy of the biggest farming district in Scotland. The result is a fascinating work, strong in its grasp of the values of a society as expressed in its literature, and also on the daily life of the working folk. There is a poignancy in the fact that the blows that broke up this coherent culture were only partly the unkindness of its economic prospects. The attraction of a less arduous life in better material conditions eventually depopulated the crofts, and so removed the labour supply of the whole farming

region. If there were to be one single work deserving a prize for originality in Scottish modern history over this period, it is to this that I would give it.

This brief survey inescapably brings forward the importance of the role of 'John Donald' as the main publisher of Scottish history. Without the patriotic enterprise of this firm we in Scotland would be a great deal the poorer in our intellectual life. It is high time that Scots should say thank you for a permanent benefit to their culture.