

The New Penguin History of Scotland: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day

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The cover is a view from Stirling Castle: in the foreground a carved lion rampant, in the background the Wallace Tower, the Scottish national monument, raised by public subscription in 1859; in the valley below, Stirling Bridge somewhere near the site of William Wallace's victory over the forces of Edward I in 1297; just out of the picture, the field of Bannockburn. It has not quite the cringe effect of Penguin's last excursion into Scottish History, Tom Devine's *Scottish Nation*, on the cover of which a Scottish Saltire is being raised on the mountain top, with echoes of John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, but it comes close. It bodes yet another post-devolution search for Scottish identity. Parts of the introduction by the editors do not reassure. While so-called 'tartan history' is eschewed, 'telling Scotland's story as closely as possible to the "way it was"' is from a world before postmodernism was ever thought of. It is true that there are not many signs that post-modern approaches have made inroads into Scottish history, but, on the whole, however, the fears of yet another search for the roots of the new Scotland are unfounded. What we have are eight highly competent essays, some exceptionally good, which try to present a rounded picture of economic, social, cultural and political life in Scotland, with two blocks of nearly seventy illustrations of artefacts held by the National Museums of Scotland.

For the non-specialist, such as this reviewer, whose knowledge of pre-medieval Scotland is decades out of date, the two opening chapters, Ian Armit on 'Prehistory' and Thomas Clancy and Barbara Crawford on 'The formation of the Scottish Kingdom', have much new to offer. A world of long journeys and complex relationships, at least for a few, can be conjured from the Megalithic tombs, the longhouses and the ceramic remnants that survive throughout what was to become Scotland, long before the place appears in the written record with Tacitus's account of Agricola's invasion in AD 83. What has disappeared is the long-held view that a Celtic invasion brought new peoples to the land. For Ian Armit, the 'coming of the Celts' was a long-drawn out process of absorption of culture and language 'not an explosive event'. The Romans came and soon departed behind Hadrian's wall and, by the fourth century AD, had provoked collaboration between different groups north of the wall into those they called the Picts. With the departure of the Romans and the arrival of Gaels from Ireland and Angles from the south, Britons, Angles, Gaels and Picts shared the land. St Ninian can no longer be confidently claimed to have brought Christianity to the south-west in the fourth

century; not until the sixth century is there clear evidence of Christian presence. After 563 Columba spread monastic settlements from Iona along the Gaelic west coast and embarked on the process of evangelising the Picts. The Synod of Whitby in 664, once viewed as Roman Christianity overwhelming Celtic Christianity (English *versus* Scots) around the issue of the date of Easter, proves to be much more complex. By the eighth century a remarkably stable Pictish kingdom had emerged, to which were added, over the next three hundred years, Viking settlers. At the same time Gaelic language and culture from the west began to overwhelm the Pictish lands of the east, with a new kingdom of Alba appearing under the descendants of Cinaed Mac Ailpín (Kenneth MacAlpine). By the early eleventh century, Malcolm Canmore and his saintly Queen Margaret were presiding over a relatively peaceful kingdom with close ties with Anglo-Saxon England. Scotland had been born.

Over the next 450 years a complex and variable relationship with its bigger southern neighbour was at the centre of Scottish politics. The tale is well told by David Ditchburn and Alistair MacDonald in their chapter on medieval Scotland. But the chapter is especially good on the everyday life of the mass of the inhabitants. There was still slavery as late as the twelfth century but by the fourteenth there seems to have been a reasonably comfortable Scottish peasantry within a loose and patchy kind of feudalism. Certainly the lack of peasants' revolts is remarkable, but they may, the authors suggest, have been checked by pretty brutal repression. As with so much of this period the evidence for firm conclusions is thin. To sophisticated French observers Scotland was a backward place populated by gluttons, vagrants and fighters. To outsiders there was a national identity. To insiders there were numerous other identities that could take precedence. Hence the complex and divided loyalties of the wars of independence at the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries. Bannockburn solved little and centuries of Anglo-Scottish wars followed. Perhaps the authors are right to see anglophobia as being the most enduring medieval legacy, after all the hope of once again seeing off 'proud Edward's army' is still expected to rouse them at Murrayfield. Was 'innate conservatism', as they also suggest, another legacy? It is true that there were few challenges to the existing Stewart order, but fifteenth and sixteenth century Scotland was perhaps more outward looking and more in touch with continental developments than they give credit to and the remarkable thing was to survive with relative unity.

The problem with a chapter break at 1560 is that there is remarkably little on the causes of what is arguably the most significant event, the Reformation. The previous chapter looks forward to it, Keith Brown's chapter 'From Reformation to Union' has more to say of its consequences. There is slightly more sympathy for Mary Stewart than one gets from a reading of Jenny Wormald (1) and a recognition that seismic social and political changes have to be set alongside Mary's flawed political and personal judgements. There is also a useful reassessment of James VI and I, pointing to a political shrewdness that belied his indolence. Meanwhile, Presbyterianism gained hold and successive attempts to replace it with an episcopalian order led to bitter conflicts in the seventeenth century. The Covenanters' revolution of the 1640s was fatal for Charles I and profoundly significant as an assertion of the right of rebellion against an ungodly ruler and of the right of relatively ordinary people to say something about politics. At the same time, it looked back to the sixteenth-century George Buchanan's arguments that royal power came from the people and, if rulers forgot that, could be withdrawn by the people. It was a belief that was to be picked up again in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when the example of the Covenanters found their place in radical perceptions. The Marquis of Montrose's brutal attempts at repression with an army of Irish Catholic mercenaries were also to feed into the Scottish consciousness. Like all the Stewarts, Charles II learned little from the past and, while he survived, his brother paid the price of attempts to impose bishops and subsequently Catholicism. William III, Glencoe apart, according to Brown, wisely 'left the Scots to govern themselves'. The nobility re-tightened their grip.

Brown's chapter is more heavily political than many of the others, but social and cultural changes are noted. By the end of the sixteenth century there were five universities and a steady stream of students to European universities such as Leiden. The level of literacy among trades people was substantially more extensive than in England. Scientific enquiry and legal debate began to interest the intellectuals, but the all-pervasive obsession with religion was hard to challenge. A single paragraph on the subject of witchcraft hardly seems

adequate to encapsulate Scotland's abysmal record of legal and sometimes illegal, murder, mainly of women, from 1590 until the last poor soul from Dornoch in 1727 who died for having turned her daughter into a pony. The paradoxes of Scottish culture were already very apparent.

The Union of 1707 was perfectly logical and reasonably lucrative for a cash-strapped Scots nobility who had for some time looked longingly at the splendour of London and the royal court. Powerful elements of church and law were appeased and the old order was able to survive in power for another century and a quarter with little challenge. There is some recognition of the popular resistance to Union that Chris Whatley has recently documented (2) but to Brown the general acceptance of the Union shows 'a new level of political maturity', to Bruce Lenman in the following chapter it was the *ancien régime* pursuing its own selfish interests.

Lenman's chapter is written with predictable flair, pointing up so many paradoxes of eighteenth-century Scotland. We have a society going through massive economic and social change while the aristocratic political system remained remarkably intact. The landed gentry pulled more power into their hands and away from the church. A determined effort to raise income to match their new life-style in London led to a squeeze on tenants and the start of the process of highland clearance and lowland 'improvement'. But, before the Napoleonic Wars, agricultural improvement rarely brought a profit and a snout in the political trough remained important. As Daniel Szechi has shown, even the Jacobite rebellions did not fully undermine *class* loyalties and most Jacobite families were soon back in control of their forfeited lands. Lenman presents balanced accounts of the rebellions - reflecting more Episcopalian than Catholic discontents - and he is good on the remarkably resilient Highland culture that survived the predations on the Highlands in the aftermath of Culloden. The multiplicity of ideas which went to make up the Enlightenment in eighteenth century Scotland is less easy to encapsulate in the few pages available, but Lenman brings out well the social conservatism of so many of the Edinburgh literati, radical 'when they were sure that there was no chance their ideas would be implemented', tied to and closely defensive of the landed order.

Bob Morris and Graeme Morton on the 1832-1914 period are right to start with the Disruption of 1843. Religion remained central to any understanding of Scottish society and politics in at least the first half of the period, with sectarian rivalry *within* Protestantism deepening. Not surprisingly, given the credentials of the authors, the chapter is good on the towns and the civil society that developed within them. The focus, alas, never gets much beyond the central belt, which is a pity because the other cities and the smaller towns of Victorian Scotland not only have their own characteristics, but also provide the background for many of those who actually ran Edinburgh and Glasgow. It was also the values and attitudes of such smaller towns that shaped Scotland's perception of itself well through the twentieth century. The Highlands and the land generally also receive rather short shrift. But it was land issues and a hostility to the landed class which kept Liberalism dominant for much of the period and which emerging Labour was to pick up at the end of the century. But the politics are all rather thin. Where are the Liberals? Where is Liberal Unionism which provided a welcome stepping stone to the Right for so many well-heeled Scots, for whom Conservatism was still a step too far and who gave Scotland an anti-Liberal majority in 1900? Where is the whole culture of municipal enterprise transmuted into municipal socialism?

The twentieth century gets two chapters: John Foster on 1914 until 1979, Christopher Harvie on the years since 1979. Foster writes a brilliant essay on the tensions within Scottish society between modernisers and defenders of vested interests, between radicals and conservatives within all groups of Scottish society, business people, trade unionists, artists as well as politicians. To Foster the militancy of 'Red Clydeside' built up during the later years of the first World War and immediately afterwards was a symptom of profound social changes. Accompanying these was the quite sudden sharp move to the left by the Scottish working class. Scottish business leaders, like Lord Weir, Sir James Lithgow, Eric and Auckland Geddes at the heart of government, were prepared to generate a recession in order to try to re-impose discipline and regain the industrial control which they had lost in the war years. Over the next fifteen years these same powerful interests pursued a policy of rationalising the traditional heavy industries of shipbuilding and steel where their interests lay and doing little to encourage the develop of new industries which might increase the bargaining power of their labour forces. The result was the deep unemployment in the mining and

shipbuilding areas in the early 1930s. Despite it all, the amount of social protest in Scotland remained very small. Government action to control 'rough' activities, government resources to encourage 'rational recreation' and sectarian tensions all helped ensure that any challenge to the existing order was limited. An alliance of business and the emerging professional classes was built up by the Conservative and Unionist Party. Once again, the theme of a socially conservative society emerges, beautifully illustrated by the parade at the opening of the Empire Exhibition in Glasgow in 1938. After the royal party came cars carrying the Earl of Elgin, then Sir James Lithgow and Sir Cecil Weir, then the general manager of the Union bank and the ship-owning Salvesen family. Not until the eleventh car did Glasgow's Labour Lord Provost appear. The statement about the realities of power was plain to see.

It was after the second World War that the old order began to break as external forces came into play, but even then its influence did not entirely disappear and a wariness of too much encouragement of new industries which might pull workers away from heavy industry remained. Foster convincingly paints a picture of the 1950s and 1960s as, once again, a struggle between modernisers and the interests of heavy industry. What was apparent to all, however, was the steady loss of Scottish control over their industries and the loss of Scottish influence in Whitehall. It was most clearly obvious in the North Sea oil industry that emerged after 1969, firmly under American domination and, in contrast to the pattern in Norway, committed to speedy extraction. As others have shown, the gains for the Scottish economy even in the 'oil capital' of Aberdeen were limited.⁽³⁾ Politically, however, the effect was to generate a new confidence and a new demand for political change which was to build over the next decades. None of the above does justice to the range and penetration of Foster's chapter, where the poems of McDiarmid and the novels of McIlvanney are interwoven with the intricacies of deals between banks and businessmen behind the closed doors of the City of London and the smoke-filled rooms of the west of Scotland labour movement.

Finally, Christopher Harvie, with his accustomed verve, takes us smack up to date to the re-election of Tony Blair in June 2001 and the first sign that Conservatism had not entirely disappeared in Scotland, with one seat regained. In between were the Thatcher years, for many the single most important cause of the Scots determination to reject Toryism. Harvie plays down Margaret Thatcher's significance compared with the economic changes and their social effects which were making unionism less attractive. Also, as Foster shows, the significant changes and the advance of both socialism and nationalism were already underway in the 1970s. Thatcher's failure to understand the changes or almost anything about the Scottish mentality, and poor advice, according to Harvie, from an insensitive Malcolm Rifkind at the Scottish Office, merely speeded up a trend to question the value of the existing political union, which came to a climax in the 1999 referendum and the opening of the Scottish Parliament.

Good essays, some brilliant, most a pleasure to read, but what is the book for? It is not at all clear at whom it is aimed: too general for the specialist and student, too specialist and too large for the tourist. There are no references -- only bibliographical essays at the end of each chapter. Did we really need another general history? In recent years we have had umpteen general histories of varying quality, television histories 'In Search of Scotland', newspaper histories on 'The Struggle of a Nation' and essay collections. Yet, a look at the bibliographies gives an indication of how limited the really new research has been on politics, on industry and economy, on education, on gender, on welfare, on popular culture, on specific localities. The editors, who provide the lengthy introduction, make the doubtful claim that there is a 'lack of informed knowledge of Scotland's past' and that the volume has the simple purpose of 'more fully and accurately [understanding] the place of Scotland the Scots in time'. Whether any of it will be achieved by the national focus of such a work is debatable and whether it can be done without more research is even more open to question. The early chapters with their broad sweep tend to place Scotland in a wider European context. From the Reformation years onwards, however, there is little attempt to compare Scotland's experience with anywhere but England. The imperial dimension, so important financially and economically from at least the eighteenth century and, certainly by the nineteenth century crucially important in how the Scots saw themselves, hardly features. The problem of one synthesis after another is that new questions tend not to be asked and new approaches tend not to be adopted and the discipline stagnates.

Notes

1. J. M. Wormald, *Mary Queen of Scots: A Study in Failure* (George Phillip: London, 1988).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. C. A. Whatley, *Scottish Society, 1707-1830* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2000).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. David Newlands, 'The oil economy', in W. Hamish Fraser and Clive H. Lee (eds.), *Aberdeen 1800-2000. A New History* (Tuckwell Press: East Linton, 2000).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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