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The Scottish Nation, 1700-2000

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For at least the first half of the twentieth century, Scottish history could be said to have stopped in 1707. The history of the Scottish nation was the history of Bruce, Wallace and the Douglases; of knights in armour, cross-border warfare and corrupt priests. Only with the second half of the twentieth century has greater effort been made to address the modern Scottish nation and to see it as a vibrant and vital entity from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the present day. Scotland has been examined not just as a nation state but as a significant part of the British Isles, the British Empire and the world as a whole. A major part of this increased level of scholarship has occurred in the past decade and is focused on new centres of excellence as well as more traditional venues. Professor Devine has been at the forefront of the reappraisal and renaissance. To take on a project such as 'The Scottish Nation' is a daunting and challenging task, but one fitting for a historian of his stature.

It is extremely difficult to write a general history of a nation. To attempt to cover, in a new and refreshing way, even three hundred years of Scotland's most recent past is an endeavour that has to be applauded and commended. In his most recent work, Professor Devine, of the Centre for Scottish and Irish History at the University of Aberdeen, sets out 'to present a coherent account ofScotland's past with the hope of developing a better understanding of the Scottish present'. It is a grand aim and, in places, is has been clearly and expertly accomplished. Devine attempts to synthesise a considerable amount of recent research in order to better understand the last three hundred years of the Scottish Nation. Parts two and three of the volume - dealing with nearly two hundred years between 1760 and 1939 - have some of the most invigorating and lucid historical writing of the past decade. That 'The Scottish Nation' is a book which ultimately fails to convince the reader is partly due to an unconfident part one (1700-1760), and partly due to a disappointing part four (1939-2000). This is not entirely the fault of the author - he concentrates on his areas of speciality and the areas of speciality of recent research. As a result, huge emphasis is placed on the development of the

west of Scotland and large sections of the physical Scottish Nation are left neglected or ignored.

Devine himself admits that the first part of the volume (dealing with the period 1700-1760) is not the 'core' of the book. It is an introduction to his main subject matter and, as such, it suffers from the problems of many such broad surveys of the early eighteenth century. In reality, this part of the book was written thirty years ago - its *foci* and interpretations have all been seen before and, in many cases, been seen in more convincing manner. For example, to say Robert Burns 'waxed eloquent' on the theme of Britain in his 'Ode to George Washington's Birthday' (a poem which finished 'But while we sing God Save the King/We'll ne'er forget the people') is perhaps indicative of an agenda slightly at odds with some of the available evidence. Devine's broad sweep of, perhaps, the most difficult sixty year period in Scotland's history is solid and traditional but omits the particular and the problematic. The Scotland the reader is presented with is narrow, predictable, lowland, elitist and dominated by the central belt. There is no consideration of the central Highland economy, let alone the northern isles (finally shaking off their Norse heritage), Caithness, Sutherland or even lowland Morayshire (where Gaelic was being ousted from everyday use just as Scots was being replaced in the lowland usage). While there are many valuable issues raised and illuminated, points are made concerning some situations - such as the comparative decline in the populations and industrial base of Aberdeen and Dundee - which suffer without any great attempt to analyse the context and the lasting effect. Comments are made concerning the Scottish church (such as the existence of 900 post-union parishes) which neatly mask more difficult questions (why only 900 when, pre-reformation (1560), there had been 1100? - nearly a twenty per cent decline). Similarly, in the chapter on the Kirk, there is plenty on the expected areas - discipline, education, structure and schism - but one glaring aspect appears to be missing, the area of faith and belief.

Throughout the first part of the volume, Professor Devine answers questions which have been answered many times before but fails to address questions which, perhaps, could have merited with detailed consideration. In economic areas, who were the entrepreneurs and who were the investors in post-union Scotland? Were they all, or predominantly, Scottish in origin? How easily did the rural dispossessed acquire different skills in the newly urbanised world? How did the populace spend their time? Was Scotland the cultural desert Devine would have us believe (through omission of any serious discussion of this area at all)? Another slight concern is that, in a volume aimed at 'a wider public audience', Devine relies on a considerable amount of assumed knowledge during the first part of the book. As a minor example, when discussing the 1715 Jacobite Rebellion, he fails to mention that Queen Anne (the last Stuart monarch) had died the previous year and had been succeeded by a representative of the German House of Hanover. The decease of the last representative of the royal House of Stewart (ruling monarchs since the fourteenth century) surely merits some discussion in the history of the 'Scottish Nation' - for the political and constitutional ramifications if not for its own sake.

The second part of the book (dealing with the period 1760-1830) is Professor Devine at his most comfortable and most accomplished. His easy style confidently links political developments to economic, military and population changes. Throughout most of the second part of the volume there is clear analysis behind the changes and consideration of the long-term implications these changes have on both the Scottish nation and the Scottish psyche. The treatment of the period is fresh and balanced dealing with each of the major themes of the later eighteenth century in turn. For example, the chapter on agrarian change (a topic each Scottish schoolchild knows and dreads) is an excellent analysis of not only the changes in the physical landscape but the continuities from the earlier changes undertaken by far-seeing landlords. The chapter expertly ranges from Man's relationship to his environment through increased crop yields to the ceiling mouldings on the houses of the newly financially empowered middle classes. Devine's consideration of social dislocation is unparalleled and his continual stress not on the changes themselves but on the overall pace of change make the chapter exhilarating as well as informative. Throughout, English and Imperial contexts are borne in mind and the mounting pressures facing the Scottish Nation is expertly described and analysed. This expert treatment is carried on into later chapters, for example, on urbanisation. Here discussion ranges across the border mill towns, through the rapidly industrialising central heart of Scotland to the linen towns of Angus and beyond to the market towns of the north and the north-east. The dangers of

an urban economy - over-crowding, poor sanitation, poverty, poor health, disease and mortality - are narrated in a clear and uncomplicated fashion. The fact that the Scottish urban societies often retained strong links with their rural hinterland and often retained a collective mind-set with non-urbanised sections of the community is a point well made and worth remembering.

Worryingly, there are still a few problems in the section. Even in the best chapter on urbanisation, there is little discussion of how (and why) people coped; nor is there any emphasis on the social/geographical structure of the new cities - were there ghettos or universal camaraderie? It would appear that, in places, complexities are ignored for the sake of simplicity. As usual, the Highlands are taken to mean the Gaelic-speaking West Highlands - the Highlands proper are ignored. There is a pervasive sense of universality about the treatment of both the urban and rural areas which begs the question - 'but was it so?' There also seems to be an over-emphasis (at times, a great over-emphasis) on party (and Westminster) politics. Surely a book on the Scottish Nation should attempt to deal with the nation as a whole (or at worst, as a sum of its constituent parts)? The political elites (and even the politically motivated radical activists) made relatively little impact outside their own small sector of society. At one point, Devine states 'The rest of Scotland [that is, not Clydeside] was quiet and virtually irrelevant to the conspiracy.' If one were being uncharitable, the point could be turned on its head - 'To the majority of Scotland, Clydeside was a small area noisily engaged in radical but irrelevant action and conspiracy'.

The overall structure of description and analysis demonstrated in part two is carried on into the third part of the book (1830-1939). This part, which covers a little over a hundred years in eleven packed chapters, is the most comprehensive attempt to say something new. There is a genuine effort to deal with the contradictions of the period such the spectacular industrial success coupled with the grinding poverty of the mass of the population who worked in the yards or down the mines or in the factories. Comparisons are always borne in mind with the rest of the UK, continental Europe and further afield. There is a heavy concentration on establishment power but also an interesting contrast with the agencies of extra-parliamentary power such as the judiciary and the Kirk. Perhaps because of the length of the section, Devine is more comfortably able to deal with aspects that should have been acknowledged in the other sections of the volume - women are given their own chapter, culture and leisure are reviewed and education and 'New Scots' are competently described. Unfortunately, while this serves its purpose well in part three, it draws the reader's attention to the deficiencies of the other sections. Here a genuine attempt is made to define the 'modern' Scots, their motivations and inclinations. Unfortunately, 'modern' Scots in this period, can too easily be interpreted as solely the inter-war generation. As we enter the new millennium, modernity is, as always, objective.

Although the third section of the book presents by far the most rounded picture of Scotland and Scottish history there are some glaring omissions, for example finance. Again, some interesting questions fail to be addressed - the Highlands are again largely associated with 'the crofting society' and, in political spheres, mention is made of the grandees of nineteenth century, for example, Argyll, Minto, Stair, Fife and Rosebery. It may just cross someone's mind that these names reflect power and influence centuries old. For all the changes - the urbanisation, the agrarian revolution, the Anglicisation - were the controlling strings in the same hands? How had these hands changed and adapted? Even more than in part two of the volume, it becomes apparent that this is not a history of the Scottish Nation; it is a history of the West of Scotland with west of Scotland prejudices, west of Scotland viewpoints and west of Scotland bias. At times, the volumes screams 'Glasgow!, Glasgow!, Glasgow!'. It is a volume which will, undoubtedly, sell well in Sauchiehall Street and the Paisley Centre; it is less certain that it will sell well (or deserve to sell well) in Union Street, Aberdeen, The Wellgate Centre, Dundee, or in the small, private bookshops of Hawick and Elgin. These places too are part of the Scottish Nation.

The fourth part of the book (1939-2000) is the most disappointing. It appears to be little more than a three chapter tack-on attempting to bring a more than satisfactory history of the west of Scotland from 1760-1939 up to the present, trendy, millennium- obsessed present. Two of the three chapters deal predominantly with the introverted world of Scottish politics (at Westminster and Holyrood). Were such a focus to be given to any earlier period, the historian involved would be accused of elitism, narrowness of concept and lack of vision. Another worryingly skewed focus is when dealing with the Second World War: to write a phrase

such as 'the cost of the Second World War had been twice as great as World War for the First. Not less than 28 per cent of the countries wealth' and fail to mention the human cost of the Second World War is, at best unfortunate, at worst misjudged.

Party politics is not (thankfully) the modern 'Scottish Nation'. Apart from to a tiny politicised elite of party workers, academics and journalists, the nature of the Scottish Nationalist Party internal policy wrangles in the 1970s is both irrelevant and boring. Many of the threads intricately woven by Devine through the previous two parts of the books are not finished off and, when they are mentioned, it is merely as useful pointers to party political policy differences in the modern era. You could question where is the poverty? Where is the crime? Where is the urban and, more pertinently, the rural deprivation? Where are the drugs? Where is the leisure society? Where are the continental holidays? Where are the televisions, the videos and the computer games? Where is the football? Where is the secularisation? Where is the renewed immigration? Where is the Americanisation of Scottish culture? Where, indeed, is Scottish culture? Where are the chips, the Irn-Bru and the Sunday Post? Where, for goodness sake, is the Scottish Nation? Devine himself is the one 'out of touch with current Scottish problems'. He does not address them, let alone try to explain them in the context of what has gone before. As Devine fails to address the 'easy' questions, it is not surprising that he does not even try to get close to the more difficult ones, such as why the elite families of earlier centuries still dominate Scottish landholding and, to a certain extent, rural (and political) life. He ignores modern Scottish business and industry - the impact of oil on the north-east is hardly dealt with and it is not dealt with at all for Shetland (where the impact was/is huge), Orkney or the rest of Scotland. Devine does not explain why, politically motivated, foreign investment has been channelled to very specific areas with far-reaching implications both for those who live in the areas that do receive aid and those who live in the areas that do not. The local dimension to the national story is sadly lacking. Likewise, no mention of the lively counter-culture is provided and a fleeting reference to a Billy Connolly joke is all that passes for an analysis of the Scottish people's ability both to be honest about themselves and to laugh through the pain. Asked whether, in the light of recent developments, it was safer to openly gay in Glasgow or Edinburgh, one wit remarked 'Glasgow definitely; with all the new MSP's around in the capital, you may wake up the next day with your backside splashed across the front of the Evening News'. Instead of dealing with the modern Scottish Nation, Devine, instead, prefers to give valuable space and analysis to figures such as Michael Forsyth, who (regardless of political prejudice) in the pantheon of the Scottish Nation must be regarded as a man not worthy to carry the coats of the Great. Part four is a wasted opportunity to analyse Scotland now in the context of Scotland then.

In summary, as Professor Devine quotes of Andrew Marr: 'Those who live by the hype shall die by the hype.' As the 'largest scale history of Scotland over the last three centuries ever published', parts one and four of this volume deserve a quick and very private burial. Parts two and three however deserve, if not immortality, at least a long and successful lifespan. Overall, the volume suffers from a number of fundamental problems and although, in reality, it may become a standard text at school and university level, it will go the way of all such 'cover-all histories' - it will be condemned for what it omits and not praised for the positive things its says. It will be criticised not for the scholarship (which is exemplary) but for the interpretation and bias. It will in time, hopefully, be superseded by more rounded and more accurate portrayal of the whole of 'The Scottish Nation' from 1707 to 2000.

The author declined to respond on this occasion.

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[2]

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