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A New Race of Men: Scotland 1815-1914

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Michael Fry is that unusual individual these days, an independent scholar and a regular (often controversial and amusing) newspaper columnist, who has also devoted himself to becoming a highly productive and successful historian of his adopted country. Indeed so prolific has he been he would be worthy of hire by any university department anxious for immediate enhancement of its research profile. Fry?s publications have seen him described as Scotland?s most controversial historian and certainly each of his books has overturned some cherished myth or promoted a revision dramatic enough to enhance sales well beyond Scotland. His most recent works include studies of the Scottish empire, the Scottish Highlands, the union of Scotland and England, and a history of the city of Edinburgh. What is left, one wonders, but these and others, in whole or in part, have informed the present work.(1)

It may come as a surprise to some that even before the Scottish independence referendum has been fought to a conclusion (as it will be in 2014, whatever the outcome) a Scottish Government already exists. It has done since the Scottish National Party gained minority then outright control in the Scottish Parliament, re-branding the previous ?Executive? a ?Government?. The Glasgow poet, Tom Leonard, described this exercise as nothing more than a ?sleekit mantra of jaunty national pride?, further reflected in the re-branding

of almost every other quasi non-governmental organisation and many other institutions beyond the public sector, the most recent being ?Police Scotland?, a new national force.

While this raised the hackles of Leonard and others, historically it was no more than a recognition of what had existed not just since 1999 when the parliament ?reconvened?, but had been a reality in all but name since the union of the Scottish and English parliaments nearly three hundred years earlier in 1707. The Scottish ?administrative state?, lacking its pre-1707 representation, but no more corrupt than any other in Europe, continued largely unaffected by English ways till the first Reform Act. It grew rapidly thereafter, sometimes adapting English governance, more often than not finding its own way. What in the long view this apparently self-styled government and Scottish society as whole have inherited from the 19th century is the subject of this book.

Perhaps inevitably the title will also raise a potential *stushie* (if it needs to be explained to *southerns* and others, a disturbance or riot) among female readers, but as I duly note, they will find women and gender issues occupy considerable space in Fry?s narrative. It will also be of some comfort that the male scholars who hitherto dominated Scottish historical studies of this period come in for considerably more criticism from Fry than do their female counterparts. Those who come in for greatest disapprobation are the socio-economic historians (myself included, I suspect), whom Fry believes have over-done the statistical analysis to the neglect not only of the human dimension but also of politics and culture (neither true in my opinion).

Fry seems to think that the social and economic studies by historians of Victorian Scotland have actually done the nation a disservice in neglecting the bigger picture. If a visitor from Mars had landed around 1880 and looked just at the statistics, says Fry, he or she would have concluded that ?the union of 1707 was reaching a triumphant conclusion in at last making one country out of two?. The reality, Fry maintains, was very different.

The approach here is pretty much that followed in the majority of his previous books. Structured thematically in five parts it examines in turn the economy, society, what he calls ?margins?, politics, and, finally, culture, each part consisting of a series of cameo chapters, essentially self-contained essays on key themes in the history of the period. This works quite well, though there?s some overlap in places and it?s sometimes hard to see the links between the same issues raised in different contexts or personalities recurring in different sections of the book. But, as usual with Fry, the writing is elegant, the presentation and style are accessible (often with a touch of cynicism and under-stated humour that are par for the course), the scholarship is formidable, and the insights invariably refreshing. I suppose we could really do without the side-swipes at fellow historians, but you need to be thick skinned in this business, and speaking personally you meet far more animosity on the conference circuit internationally than you do in the footnotes of this and Fry?s numerous other publications.

For all his rejection of socio-scientific approaches, Fry devotes considerable attention to the economy, describing the country?s rapid industrial revolution (much faster than in England) and transformation from a rural, agrarian country to an urban manufacturing one. I welcome his recognition that agriculture, a major employer of labour well into the 19th century, played a key role in the whole story. Certainly it seems processing the products of the land generated significant proto-industrial enterprises, for example in linen and woollen textiles, or the drink industries, particularly distilling (licit or not). Factory industry followed in textiles, increasingly urbanised in places like Glasgow, Paisley and Dundee, while many other sectors including coal mining, iron production, engineering, shipbuilding and chemicals expanded rapidly and with a tendency towards large-scale enterprises. Much depended on readily available resources and cheap labour (or at least lower wages than in England), though Scots inventive genius and entrepreneurship were both much in evidence throughout most of the period. The Scots were also good at developing an effective infrastructure of roads, canals, steamships and railways, ultimately penetrating even the most remote corners of the Highlands. Through their shipping services manufacturers exported to every corner of the globe, while the banks and finance houses behind all this also made canny investments in land, mining and other enterprises in the major areas of Scots settlement, like Canada, Australia and New Zealand. From the 1870 to1914 Scotland apparently triumphed as the ?Workshop of the Empire? with its enormous emphasis on

heavy industry. Although, as Fry indicates, problems were already evident, such as failing entrepreneurship and foreign competition, Scotland still had a distinct and relatively successful economy within Britain and its Empire.

Just as industrialisation proceeded at a faster rate than in England, so urbanisation powered ahead at amazing speed, affecting the four major cities and numerous smaller centres of manufacturing or those circled by collieries and iron works. Into these poured migrants from the countryside, the Highlands and from Ireland, some of whom prospered, though the majority remained on the margins, often victims of discrimination, poor housing, low wages, periodic unemployment, and poverty that was the lot of the labouring classes. As Fry indicates, the extremes were everywhere to be seen in Victorian Scotland, from the degraded state of the Gaels in the north or the Irish immigrants packed into urban tenements and cellars, contrasted with the wealth of the new men in their baronial shooting lodges and splendid country or coastal villas. But standards of living for many, contrary to the views of some scholars, did improve, though as elsewhere it was a long-term business.

Fry devotes considerable space to the great Scottish institutions that survived the union and helped define the nation, notably the law, the kirk and education. All were dominated by an intellectual elite, the product of the four ancient universities and the later stages of the Scottish Enlightenment. Senior law officers headed by the Lord Advocate and working in tandem with the Home Department essentially ran the state, an arrangement that continued until in 1885 the office of Secretary for Scotland was revived to head an amalgam of state bodies that formed the predecessor of the Scottish Office. Revisions of Scots law on English lines were generally resisted, though as Fry points out, Anglicisation was inescapable in some areas, notably education. This led in the Highlands to further degradation of Gaelic language and culture.

These days, as Fry says, it is hard to comprehend the enormous influence the kirk exercised nationally and locally on civic affairs, welfare and moral order, nor the often obscure debates about theological issues and religious rights. This was particularly so in the years leading up to the Disruption and the breaking of the Free Church from the Established in 1843. The former proved more progressive in outlook than the latter, a large proportion of voters among its congregations being traditional Liberal supporters.

Education was certainly another long cherished feature of Scottish life ? society apparently being better educated and with higher levels of literacy than in England and most European countries. Such claims have been the subjects of considerable historical debate notably by Professors Smout and Houston, and I would concur with Fry that the jury is still out on comparative levels of literacy and, indeed, on the whole idea of a democratic tradition in Scottish education generally. Parochial education was nearly universal in the Lowlands (and much extended in the Highlands at this period), while opportunities for university study seem quite genuinely to have reached down to the ?lad of parts? (the clever peasant boy). Curricula were long regarded as progressive but general, while later in the century English-style specialisation was beginning to creep in ? in universities at least, where the debate about its validity continues. But anyway Scottish school education retained a quite distinctive ethos and by the 1880s possessed a centralised administration and a national curriculum.

While the Scottish Enlightenment is celebrated as an era of dramatic advance in the arts (including science and medicine), the 19th century, says Fry, also produced a significant cultural shift that had a global impact. The literary canon generated by Walter Scott, James Hogg, John Galt, and later Robert Louis Stevenson and George Douglas Brown (he of *The House with the Green Shutters*, one of the few realist novels of its time), and even the often despised ?Kailyard? novelists (who produced mainly romantic nostalgia) helped sustain a national culture previously enriched by the poets, Robert Fergusson and Robert Burns. Art and architecture both did the same, the artist David Wilkie capturing everyday life and character, and the brothers Faed, such subjects as the resilience of the Gaels in the face of clearance and enforced migration from their homeland. The architectural heritage was enhanced by a vast construction programme ranging from traditional tenements embellished in Scots baronial style to their later modernist equivalent in Charles Rennie Mackintosh?s magnificent public buildings, mainly in Glasgow, by then the ?Second City of the Empire?.

And there were the great thinkers and do-ers in the others arts ? medicine, science and invention, all reflecting the practical application of knowledge so typically Scottish. Strangely, given Fry?s concern that women be included in his title, their formidable contribution to 19th-century Scottish culture (including medicine and science ultimately) receives less attention than it deserves: Anne Grant, Joanna Baillie and Margaret Oliphant being prominent omissions on the literary front. Incidentally these women, and many more, proudly promoted their Scottish-ness in much of their work.

Politics also marked Scotland out as different. A solid and indispensible bloc of Scots Liberals helped sustain that party in government for much of the century. Scottish liberalism, as Fry observes, was generally reformist, embracing three factions, the paternalist land-owning Whigs, the new middle-class Liberals of the cities and towns, and (eventually) the working-class radicals. Inevitably, however, divisions arose exacerbated by national issues such as further political reform, free trade, the Irish Question, the imperial mission and more local ones like religious dissention, Highland distress and land reform, and, in the longer term, Home Rule. Like that of British politics generally it is a complex story that Fry unravels in an attempt to explain the dichotomy of commitment to union while sustaining Scottish difference. Indeed, much of the discourse here concerns nationality and how it impacted on the politics of the period. Historical analogies are always dangerous but given the book?s gestation at a time of fervent debate about Scotland?s future and its publication a year in advance of the independence referendum, Fry can hardly avoid alluding to it.

In some ways it is hard to position *A New Race of Men* in the current output of historical writing on Scotland. Highly original in concept, particularly in its inter-disciplinary approach, packed full of insights based on much new research, and presented in a highly readable style, it is frankly a long way from much else that?s been written on 19th-century Scottish history. It will annoy some other historians and critics, but in the tradition of scholarly, thoughtful, popular history established by T. C. Smout in his *History of the Scottish People* and *A Century of the Scottish People*, seems likely to command a wide audience. *A New Race of Men* is certainly timely in helping explain how the country has arrived at its present situation ? and facing perhaps its most momentous decision since 1707.

Notes

1. *The Scottish Empire* (Edinburgh, 2001); *Wild Scots: Four Hundred Years of Highland History* (London, 2005); *Edinburgh: a History of the City* (London, 2009) and *The Union: England, Scotland and the Treaty of 1707* (Edinburgh, 2006, new ed. 2013).Back to (1)

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