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Scotland Re-formed, 1488-1587

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Author:
Jane Dawson
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Julian Goodare

Scotland's history is increasingly well served by textbooks. In addition to the Edinburgh History of Scotland (four volumes, 1965-75) and the New History of Scotland (eight volumes, 1981-4), we now have the New Edinburgh History of Scotland (10 volumes, in progress), not to mention Michael Lynch's substantial and phenomenally successful *Scotland: A New History* (2nd edn., 1992). Edinburgh University Press is to be congratulated on the launch of this latest series, especially when it also publishes the New History of Scotland and appears committed to keeping this older series in print with revised editions and even replacement volumes. It is worth pausing over these series and disentangling their confusingly similar titles, since they explain some of the nature of the book under review: volume six in the New Edinburgh History of Scotland, covering (roughly) the 16th century.

The Edinburgh History and New History series were masterminded by Gordon Donaldson and Jenny Wormald respectively - both early modern scholars whose own volumes included coverage of the 16th century. The Edinburgh History in this period comprises detailed narratives of political history, interspersed with thematic essay-type chapters. Although there has been an explosion of historical research since Donaldson published his volume in 1965, his extensive knowledge of the primary sources has made his narrative, in particular, remarkably hard-wearing - and it is the only one to be fully referenced. The New History, which dispensed with references altogether, contains an outline narrative but is mainly thematic,

with analytical material that is particularly popular with undergraduates.

Faced with this stiff competition, the New Edinburgh History series has opted to complement, rather than challenge, its stable-mate the New History. It has taken a more strongly narrative approach even than the Edinburgh History. Jane Dawson's volume has a thematic introduction and conclusion, together comprising about one-seventh of the text, but everything in between tells a continuous story. And it can be quite a detailed story; period for period, the wordage she has available is about half as much again as the Edinburgh History, and three times the New History (the eight volumes of which are all quite short).

Dawson's narrative, however, differs from Donaldson's. He took a no-nonsense, what-happened-in-1523 approach, which these days is not very exciting either for undergraduates or for scholars, but serves the latter as a valuable reference tool, especially with its footnotes indicating the primary sources. In his bibliographical essay he wrote of his 19th-century predecessors, 'A general history on a substantial scale is seldom, if ever, entirely superseded', and this can apply also to his own work. Dawson gives a good deal of information about immediate events but does not always feel obliged to provide a year-on-year narrative. And she certainly does not guide the reader to the primary sources; there are occasional footnotes, but only for direct quotations from primary sources, and most of the citations are to secondary works in which the passages concerned have been quoted.

What Dawson does is to provide a detailed running commentary on political events. Her text is arranged as a series of miniature essays, addressing the most important issues in a given period. Her account of 1523 comes in a three-page section entitled 'Sliding into factionalism', covering roughly the period 1517-25; it is preceded by a section on 'Regent Albany' (1515-17) and followed by one on 'The struggle for king and country' (1525-6). This is helpful in making sense of the onward rush of events, and sensibly includes anecdotes that help to make them memorable. Also inserted in the narrative at this point is a one-page text box entitled 'Scotland's place in Christendom visualised', about the heraldic ceiling of St Machar's Cathedral, Aberdeen. These text boxes are a way of discussing broader topics and are often successful, though this one would have been better with an illustration. The book does have some illustrations though, unlike the Edinburgh History and New History series. There are also a few maps, a table of events and a very useful six-page table on 'The political fortunes of the five major noble families'.

Scotland is a diverse place, and its diversity is particularly important to its early modern history. Dawson, a distinguished Highland historian, makes full use of her regional expertise. She begins the book with Donald Monro's account of the Western Isles (1549), and ends it with Timothy Pont's maps of the whole country (1580s and 1590s). These introductory and concluding chapters, although thematic, are full of dynamic movement; reading them, one really gets a sense of where Scotland had come from in the middle ages, and where it was heading as it approached the 17th century. It is, perhaps, a pity that more of the book was not allowed to be like this. But every opportunity is taken to showcase the history of distinct regions, as with the Cunningham-Montgomery feud in Ayrshire (p. 111) or James V's circumnavigation of the north in 1540 (pp. 145-8). The regional discussion is much more advanced than the maps; for the distribution of languages we are referred (on p. 6) to a map that does not show languages. Being primarily about nobles and their spheres of influence, the regional discussion does not include much on towns.

One perhaps inevitable result of concentrating on political narrative is that, as well as omitting towns, the book omits the common people. Ordinary folk barely get as much as a paragraph at a time to themselves all through the 14 core chapters, though the introduction and conclusion are slightly more accommodating of their concerns. This is a pity, because the 16th century was a crucial, indeed disastrous, period for the common folk, with a population upswing leading to deterioration of diet, ploughing of high-risk marginal land and increasingly severe harvest failures and starvation. But economic history is not treated as relevant. There is an occasional sense that the book's priorities here have been determined by the policy of the series rather than the interests of the author. There is no women's history in it, for instance, but Dawson deftly includes a number of individual women, such as the calligrapher Esther Inglis (p. 7) and the customs collector Margaret Crichton (p. 67).

So what is there in the narrative? The period comprises three and a half reigns: James IV (1488-1513), James V (1513-42), Mary (1542-67) and part of James VI (1567-1625). The latter three of these all had formal minorities, in which regnal power was officially committed to a series of regents (1513-24, 1542-54, 1567-78). Mary, absent in France, continued to have a regent even after she was declared of age in 1554, returning to rule in person only in 1561. The three Jameses all had periods in which, though not formally minors, they were treated as too young to govern in person (until about 1494, 1528 and 1585 respectively); Dawson firmly categorises these periods as 'minorities', since although there was no official regent, patterns of politics resembled the regency periods. Thus, of 100 years covered by the book, Scotland had an adult ruler present for only about 42 years. Some histories focus intensely on these periods of 'personal rule', but Dawson, rightly, gives full weight to the minorities. Her attention to the regions and her mini-essay style provide a good way of giving shape to some seemingly shapeless events.

Although it is a pity that historiographical discussion has focused on royal majorities, it is nevertheless interesting to see how Dawson has responded to recent scholarly assessments of James IV, James V and Mary. James IV 'struts the European stage', as one chapter title has it, meeting nothing but success and acclaim until he makes some tactical mistakes at the head of his army on 9 September 1513 that lead to his defeat and death at Flodden. This is conventional - but Dawson also argues that he can be seen in retrospect to have been over-ambitious, with his fiscal over-extension and plundering of the church bringing malign longer-term consequences. A balanced assessment of James V is perhaps easier to reach because he has never been praised so highly. Dawson is impressed by some of his achievements, including his nine-month visit to France to seek a bride (there is even a map of his French itinerary). But she returns to a traditional interpretation of the reign by emphasising some of his high-handed later actions - executions and forfeitures that did not even lead to the recycling of patronage. The reign of Mary queen of Scots remains controversial, and Dawson tries to steer a middle course, regarding her early years favourably but blaming her for 'policy switches' after her marriage to Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley (1565) that led to a breakdown of political consensus and ultimately to her own downfall. Dawson is, perhaps, harsher on Mary than on James IV. She says (in effect) that 'Mary's promotion of Bothwell was disastrous', allowing the reader to infer that it was all Mary's fault, but with James IV the message is, 'James's invasion of England was disastrous, but it seemed like the right thing to do at the time'. Since recent accounts of Mary have tended to be more sympathetic, Dawson's treatment of her has a slightly old-fashioned air; her treatment of James IV, by contrast, really moves the debate forwards.

Along with the regional strand running through the book, there is a strong international strand. Diplomacy, another of Dawson's specialities, is carefully stressed in the narrative, especially during the wars of 1542-60 which she melodramatically calls the 'Battle for Britain'. With their backs to the wall after defeat by the English, the Scots in 1548 invite a French army in to save them - but then, having decided that the cure was worse than the disease, they rise up against the French in 1559-60 and eject them with English help. Although contingency is rightly stressed throughout, Dawson is alive to the long-term logic of the Scots' almost unprecedented adoption of what would turn out to be a permanently pro-English stance.

Much of the logic, of course, is provided by the Reformation. As one would expect from her extensive publications on the subject, Dawson takes this very seriously, and has no time for any suggestion that the Scottish Reformation was anything but fundamental. Of the 14 narrative chapters, 12 cover a century of secular politics in a consecutive fashion; chapters nine and ten run parallel to this main series, with narratives of *religious* history in the periods 1555-61 and 1560-88 respectively. Parallel narratives have featured in Dawson's work before, and she uses them well here. There is, rightly, some discussion of 'religious' matters in the main narrative too, but there is little or no actual duplication.

On the Reformation itself, Dawson successfully gains the best of both worlds. Aided by extensive recent scholarship on the pre-Reformation church, she can dismiss traditional assumptions that Catholicism was corrupt or irrelevant, or that Protestantism was an unstoppable mass movement. But the Reformation was a short-term success in 1559-60 - a walkover, even - and it allowed the creation and consolidation of a very different church with a very different style of worship. Dawson's emphasis is on worship, rather than (as it

once would have had to be) on polity; she merely tiptoes through the embers of the controversy as to whether the early Protestant church was essentially episcopalian or presbyterian. Perhaps the combination of a new religion and a new foreign policy is what is meant by the book's hyphenated title, 'Scotland Re-formed'.

Church polity is important, though, in a different way, in what Dawson calls the 'church-crown hybrid'. This is frequently cited as a system, particularly characteristic of this period, in which the crown exploited the church's system of benefices by inserting its own candidates into abbacies and bishoprics. This could reward royal servants, provide for royal bastards, or simply siphon off church income for the crown. By the later 16th century, the 'church-crown hybrid' was breaking down; the abbacies drifted away from crown control to become secular lordships, and the lands of both abbacies and bishops were steadily alienated to 'feuars', often lairds. By the end of the book, the resultant fiscal problems of James VI are very much in evidence.

There is one serious problem. Dawson is very much a member of that large and distinguished group of scholars whose prose requires considerable copy-editing - and she has been poorly served by her publishers. She can sometimes turn a pithy phrase, but much of the text that we have here should never have been allowed to get beyond an early draft. Lapses of grammar are frequent, and even the spelling is not of the standard that one would expect from a university press. The really serious problem is that the text poses challenges of comprehension. Many cumbersome sentences have to be read two or three times before their meaning becomes apparent, and a few continue to defy comprehension even then. A typical sample is: 'Although the presbytery issued a reprimand that was the end of the matter: contemporaries acknowledged blood kinship overrode religious division' (p. 234). This illustrates three of the most common stylistic tics: omission of commas, omission of the word 'that', and incorrect linking of two related sentences (a semicolon was required). There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of instances of these three tics alone, steadily eroding the goodwill and persistence of even the most patient reader. It is particularly common to find two related sentences linked with the word 'and', producing numerous 'garden-path' sentences. For another type of 'garden-path' sentence, we are told that under Morton's regency, 'Kin and allies were rewarded with' - what would you expect? Lands? Pensions? Offices? The sentence continues: '... loyal king's men forming the core of the regime' (p. 283). Dodgy grammar even brings the earl of Crawford back from the dead: 'The 6th earl, having lost the dukedom of Montrose bestowed on his father by James III, fell at Flodden before siring a legitimate male heir' (p. 140).

There are also problems of clarity and continuity with the narrative, which again a copy-editor should have sorted out. Narrative requires dates, and there tend to be fewer than one would like; George Wishart's career lacks dates entirely (pp. 164-6). The French intervene militarily in Scotland in 1548-50, and there is a good deal of discussion of the aftermath in the 1550s, before the intervention is agreed by the 1548 treaty of Haddington (pp. 172-3). John Knox is released from a French galley to which we have never been told that he was sent (p. 185). We are told about 'Margaret's resentment at her husband's previous behaviour', but not about the behaviour (p. 98). Quotations are inadequately glossed; I know what 'moneye bair biging' means, but will undergraduates understand it (p. 210)? Technical terms are unexplained, like 'anti-sacerdotal heresy' (p. 184), or medical treatment on 'classic humoral lines' (p. 26). The index, such an important feature of a textbook, is inadequate, with overlong entries that should have been subdivided, and omission of numerous names.

Responsibility for these shortcomings rests squarely with the publishers. They surely owe it to the author, and to themselves, to rectify things with a prompt second edition. In the meantime, Dawson herself deserves to be congratulated on a work of exemplary, balanced and up-to-date erudition.

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