


ALBA: CELTIC SCOTLAND IN THE MEDIEVAL ERA

E. J. Cowan and R. Andrew McDonald, eds.
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 Twenty years ago the publication of a book as comprehensive, authoritative, and altogether satisfying as this new collection of essays would have been virtually impossible. Although serious study of the minutiae of Scotland's experience in the medieval era was no longer in its infancy, scholars at that time were still busy trying to reconstruct fundamental aspects of Scottish political, economic and ecclesiastical life out of a comparatively restricted (and in many respects uneven series of) primary source materials to devote much effort to specifically Celtic aspects of the kingdom's history. Moreover, although they were well aware of the distinct place of the Celtic peoples in the early formation of Scotland, there was nevertheless a sense that the 'peaceful conquest' of the realm by the Anglo-Norman newcomers in the wake of King David I's accession in 1124 proved a watershed in shaping cultural and political foundations that were to prevail until the Reformation and beyond. As such, it merited – and earned – the lion's share of scholarly attention. In the context of so strong an historiographical conviction the contribution of the Celtic peoples to such essential aspects of state formation as land tenure, religious expression and the growth of trade was bound to be overlooked or, in some cases, marginalised altogether.

Each of the ten historians whose work is represented in this volume has gone some way towards restoring the Celtic peoples of medieval Scotland to the mainstream of historical enquiry, and all bring to their essays a thorough knowledge of surviving source materials and a strong record of solid research in their field. The book is noteworthy in several respects. In the first place,

it treats the history of the Celtic regions of Scotland from a very early period through to the sixteenth century as a unified whole, a trait seldom found elsewhere. In related fashion, it eschews almost altogether the 'pre-' and 'post-Norman' divide that to date has characterised most scholarly treatments of the medieval period. There is a sense here that the native inhabitants of Scotland had a place in political, religious and cultural affairs irrespective of the intrusion from 'foreign' influences, Norman, English or continental. In the second place, it combines not only novel studies based on hitherto untapped archival materials, but others that bring fresh perspectives to very old debates, among them the textual significance of the treatise *De situ Albanie* and the validity of genealogy as a tool in the writing of political history. Perhaps most impressive of all, readers are treated here to fine examples of research remarkably devoid of what Professor Cowan acerbically identifies as the 'clamjamfry of nonsense that is now popularly deemed to constitute part of Celtic heritage' (p. 23).

The book opens with a retrospective on the history of the idea of Celtic Scotland. Here, Professor Cowan reviews the attitudes that informed and underlay scholarly studies of the native peoples from the time of John of Fordun in the late fourteenth century to the present. The essays by Dauvit Broun, Alan Bruford and Graeme Cruickshank shed intriguing new light on a period of Scottish history often avoided in surveys of the kingdom because of a paucity of reliable extant records. Each demonstrates, moreover, that skilful handling of such jejune materials as do survive from the years before 1000 (early political, geographical or legal treatises, in both Latin and Gaelic, and especially king lists) can be made to yield a wealth of valuable insights about the organisation of Celtic society, even if the three scholars do not always agree in the conclusions they draw. Alexander Grant combines his profound knowledge of the earliest thanages of medieval Scotland with a vigorous reassessment of the role that the earldom of Ross and its lords, native, Norse and Anglo-Norman, played in the turbulent political challenges that accompanied the forging of the kingdom of Alba. Keith Stringer and R. Andrew McDonald contribute painstakingly researched studies of the lordships of Galloway and Argyll.

Both make extensive use of chronicle sources and of extant charters relating to these regions. Each demonstrates that the native lords of Galloway and Argyll shared common assumptions about the authority inherent in lordship.

Recent research has placed a great deal of emphasis on the influence of the so-called 'Irish Sea world' and, beyond that, of the Scandinavian realms on the development of Scottish society. The essays by David Sellar, Steve Boardman and Norman Macdougall offer salutary reminders of the need to appreciate the fact that the medieval Scots were as likely to look west and north as they were south when they became involved in political machinations, embarked on ambitious territorial adventures, or engaged in unlawful freebooting. All three authors make convincing cases for viewing the Lordship of the Isles as an especially vital component of the kingdom.

Despite its many strong points, the collection is not without its flaws. Cowan and McDonald's editorial touch is very light. Perhaps too light: in their introductory remarks they might have made much more of the several themes that link an otherwise wide ranging series of essays. Not least among such themes are the ways in which each of the contributions demonstrates how the writing of Scottish history has changed. Scholars working in the opening years of the new millenium bring to their research efforts more than just a sound knowledge of written source materials; they are also now regularly venturing into disciplines once regarded as beyond their ken (and sometimes their interest), including archaeology, linguistics and genealogy. Another theme that informs many of the essays is that of noble authority. Native leaders from regions as distinct as Galloway, Argyll or Ross may well, as some of these authors claim, have worked consciously to ingratiate themselves with the Norman newcomers, but all also proved adept at giving expression to their authority in ways that would have been highly surprising to their Norman fellows. A more concerted effort to make explicit these and other unifying features of the book would have made this already solid collection even stronger.

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