

REVIEWS

MEDIEVAL

MEDIEVAL SCOTLAND **CAMBRIDGE MEDIEVAL TEXTBOOKS**

A.D.M. Barrell. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.
xvi, 296 pp. Maps. £12.95 (Hardback)



Although there are many one-volume histories of Scotland as a whole, and several good books that deal with one part or another of the Middle Ages, works that take on the entire sweep of the medieval period in a single volume are a rare breed indeed. *Medieval Scotland* by A.D.M. Barrell fills an obvious lacuna in Scottish historical studies, and, what is more, manages to do it very efficiently in a mere 267 pages of text.

This book is a single-volume history of medieval Scotland, concentrating on the period from the reign of Malcolm III 'Canmore' in the eleventh century (1058-1093) to the Reformation Parliament of 1560. Eight chapters cover Early Medieval Scotland; Feudal Scotland; the Transformation of the Scottish Church; the Consolidation of the Scottish Realm; the Wars of Independence; the Stewart Kings; Crown and Nobility in Later Medieval Scotland; and the Road to Reformation. The author's approach to his subject is unashamedly traditional – that is, the book is primarily a political and ecclesiastical study. Several key themes are developed throughout, including the development of the institutions of the medieval Scottish state; crown-nobility relations; relations with external powers; the development of the Scottish church; and the formation of a distinct Scottish identity. Another major concern of the author, and one that mirrors current trends in medieval Scottish and European scholarship, is that of core-periphery interactions.

There is much to admire in this study and little to criticize. The work is valuable not only as a one-volume survey of the

period and its major developments, but it also takes full account of the tremendous amount of scholarship on the subject that has been produced over the past twenty years, and so provides an excellent synthesis of historiography as well. The author is well versed in current literature on, for example, core-periphery interactions, resistance to the Canmore kings, the nature of the transformation of the 12th-13th centuries, the nature of Stewart kingship, and the perennial debate over late medieval crown-nobility relations. The bibliography will be a very useful guide for those wishing to read further on virtually any aspect of the subject.

Another praiseworthy facet of the work is the author's even-handedness and his willingness to move beyond the tired old assessments and stereotypes that commonly find their way into even the best-intentioned texts. This shows through most prominently in chapter five, on the Wars of Independence, where the motives of Edward I are thoroughly and fairly reassessed; the internal bickering of the Scots is not diminished; and where the reigns of monarchs like John Balliol and David II, traditionally seen as unfortunate at best and dismal at worst, are thoroughly re-evaluated in light of both recent scholarship and the context of the times. Indeed, the chapter on the Wars of Independence is an excellent analysis and summing up of the whole theme from 1286 until 1371, made even more outstanding by virtue of the fact that it extends beyond some of the more traditional end-points for such an investigation (i.e. 1329, 1346). As Barrell concludes at the end of this chapter: 'The Wars of Independence were in some respects just what the name implies, a struggle for liberation, but the events of this period of crisis are much more complex than the selective rhetoric of the Declaration of Arbroath and other propaganda, Scottish and English, might suggest' (p. 136).

On the whole the coverage of each theme is thorough, economical, and incisive, and one senses that what omissions there are exist largely because of constraints of space. It is surprising, for instance, that the third chapter, on the Transformation of the Scottish Church, makes no mention of the physical transformation of the Scottish church – the building

and rebuilding of churches and monasteries – that accompanied the structural transformation of the late eleventh through the thirteenth century. Similarly, although there is a good deal of material in chapters six and seven relating to the MacDonald Lords of the Isles, it is sometimes woven unevenly in and out of the narrative, and it might have been preferable to consolidate this material in a more concise block of text – or even a separate chapter - which would have enabled the author to say even more about the division between highlands and lowlands which is such an important theme of this period in Scottish history.

Such minor points notwithstanding, *Medieval Scotland* by A.D.M. Barrell is a concise, well-informed, and authoritative one-volume history of medieval Scotland that should make its way into the library of everyone interested in the subject.

R. Andrew McDonald
University College of Cape Breton