
The passing of the 1832 Reform Act has always provoked interest among historians interested in the development of British politics and democracy. However, despite the significant historiography surrounding the political developments leading up to 1832 in England, only cursory attention has been paid to parliamentary reform in Scottish historical accounts. In the introduction to this monograph, Pentland clearly sets up the aims of the book: while most historians have so far focused their attention on the effect that the 1832 Reform Act had on the political system in England, Pentland’s goal is to discover Scotland’s distinctive experience of reform. More broadly, he also attempts to engage in the extensive academic debate on the complex relationship between England, Scotland and Ireland. By discovering Scotland’s unique experience of reform, Pentland seeks to give further understanding to the formation of a distinctive Scottish national identity in the nineteenth century.

Beginning with the first chapter, Pentland mostly focuses on the architects of the Reform Act. In particular, he focuses on the attempts made to amend parliamentary representation by Lord Archibald Hamilton and James Abercromby. Pentland does a good job of proving that the Whig party, as a whole, was not always on the same page when it came to political reform. According to Pentland, there was a wide diversity of approaches to parliamentary reform. Through diligent research of House of Commons debates and newspapers, Pentland reveals that there was a split between the Old Whigs and the New Whigs. Old Whigs wanted to restore balance to the constitution from the ‘monied’ oligarchy. They wanted to remove abuses and corruption, not to change the constitution. On the other hand, New Whigs and other
proponents for reform, like Francis Jeffrey and Henry Cockburn, followed Edmund Burke. They believed that the constitution developed gradually and could be adjusted to suit contemporary needs.

With an interest in how England, Wales and especially Ireland affected Scottish reform, Pentland is in dialogue with Linda Colley’s debate on ‘Britishness.’ Pentland’s broad approach makes for an excellent investigation into the political context of the period leading up to 1832 reform. Pentland succeeds at putting the reform movement in the context of other radical changes, such as the national protest in Ireland from Daniel O’Connell’s Catholic Association, and the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. Those movements, along with the 1832 Reform Act, greatly challenged the inviolability of the Treaty of Union. Along with proving the multiplicity of approaches to parliamentary reform throughout Scotland, Pentland is also able to show that despite the many different viewpoints, the success of reform ultimately lay in the ability of reformers to remain unified and to capture the language of patriotism and loyalty.

Throughout the monograph, Pentland relies heavily on both parliamentary debates and political speeches made at various upper class gatherings. He almost exclusively focuses on high politics and the major political figures involved in reform. The problem with this is that much of Pentland’s evidence concerning Scottish sentiments of national identity comes from political rhetoric that may or may not have echoed the feelings of the general populace concerning reform. While Pentland offers an important understanding of how the principal architects of the Reform articulated their political goals, he only pays cursory attention to the thoughts on reform from anyone other than aristocratic leaders, ignoring the major influence that the lower and middle classes had on discussions of reform. Pentland does argue that extra-parliamentary forces had a significant influence on parliamentary politics but a broader analysis of the viewpoints from the lower and middle classes would serve to further the understanding of Scottishness amongst all of the inhabitants in Scotland.

One of Pentland’s arguments is that, after the failure of the 1820 uprising, political radicals in Scotland no longer advocated violence and instead promoted strictly constitutional
methods of change. In his extensive research into the major political figures who claimed to be radicals, Pentland makes limited mention of the often times militaristic language of many extreme radicals who rejected the moderate approach to reform advocated by many high profile politicians. In truth, working and middle class radicals often used the threat of violence in their pursuit of parliamentary reform. However, their voices did usually not appear in the major Whig organs like The Scotsman, a newspaper that Pentland uses extensively. While true that many reformers were wary of using militaristic language - lest they be seen as a threat to the state - Pentland’s book provides the reader with a somewhat false sense that most reformers used strictly constitutional language in their debates on parliamentary reform.

As a brief overview of the political debates about reform and constitutionalism taking place from 1820-1832, Pentland’s book is engaging and well researched with a considerable appendix. It is clear that Pentland is in dialogue with R.J. Morris, Graeme Morton, Michael Fry, Hamish Fraser, Christopher Whatley, and other important Scottish historians. Despite limitations concerning the range of social focus in this monograph, Pentland has made an important contribution and offers a comprehensive understanding of the way that high profile Scottish politicians articulated reform and linked it to the idea of ‘Britishness.’ Since not much attention has been paid to parliamentary reform in Scottish historical accounts, Pentland’s research - informed by the English reform debates and controversies - fills an important gap. Ultimately, Pentland delivers what the title suggests: a comprehensive look at radicalism and its relation to national identity during the tumultuous years of reform 1820-1833. In doing so, Pentland has made a significant contribution to the understanding of Scottish identity at a time when Scotland’s continued representation within the empire was a major political issue.

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