REVIEW


Although the last few decades have seen a great deal of work on Irish and English politics in the French revolutionary era, there has been relatively little study of the political culture of Scotland in the same period. Indeed, for almost a century now Henry W. Meikle’s published work has remained the best available account of Scottish political life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Studies which have emerged on the topic, especially since the 1970s, have tended to stress the underlying stability of Scottish politics and society in the 1790s – so much so that a kind of historiographical orthodoxy has developed, which emphasises the limited impact of the French Revolution on Scotland compared with other parts of the British Isles.

This book challenges the orthodox view of late eighteenth-century Scottish politics, and argues that Scots in the politically turbulent 1790s were not necessarily as quiescent or loyal to the political and social status quo as many scholars have suggested. Though Scotland’s relative stability in this period is undeniable, the author argues that historians have nonetheless often overlooked or underplayed the limitations of the loyalist counter-reaction in Scotland. If the uniquely repressive legal system helped to suppress radicalism relatively quickly in Scotland, the mobilization of broader opinion against radicalism was not so swiftly or easily achieved. On the contrary, there was an unprecedented explosion of political debate in this period, which gave an increasingly broad cross-section of society incentive, likely for the first
time, to construct a new type of politics. As Harris points out, “The fact that this resulted in failure does not mean that we should relate this story primarily or only with this in view” (pp. 4-5).

Harris’s aim here is to examine Scottish responses to the French Revolution across the political spectrum; to look at radical, loyalist and patriotic politics in Scotland together, as different modes of political experience created by the unusual conditions in the last decade of the century. To that end, he divides the book into six chapters, each presenting starkly contradictory images of Scottish loyalty and discontent. The first two trace the currents of political debate and opinion in the 1790s and explore their roots in the cultural, intellectual and religious developments of previous decades. While the Scottish Enlightenment undoubtedly had a moderate and conservative influence on Scottish political culture, Harris points out, the popular Calvinist orthodoxy created a “well-spring of emotion, commitment and a tradition of ‘liberty’” which may have helped to prepare the labouring classes for the discourse on liberty and democracy which flowed from the French Revolution and the work of Thomas Paine in 1792 (pp. 8-9). The middle chapters of the book are concerned with the emergence and decline of radical politics and the mobilization of loyalist feeling in the first half of the decade, from 1792 to 1794. They emphasise the protean nature of both radicalism and loyalism, and demonstrate some of the ways that opinions and emotions could abruptly shift, depending on the context or circumstances. The final chapters focus on similarly contradictory tendencies in the latter part of the decade, juxtaposing, for example, the expressions of patriotic spirit which appeared in the spring of 1797 with the incidents of violent resistance provoked by the implementation of the Militia Act in the summer of the same year, and underlining some of the limitations of the orthodox view that a “patriotic consensus” emerged in reaction to the threat of French invasion.
In spite of the difficulties with surviving evidence, Harris has tried to take regional difference into account as much as possible in his analysis, drawing on material from local and regional archives beyond Edinburgh and Glasgow. There is also a strong comparative aspect to the book, and not just with Ireland, whose uniquely combustible political culture can provide too stark a contrast with the relative placidity of Scottish society in this period – at least prior to 1796, Harris suggests, connections to England had a significantly stronger influence on the path of Scottish radical politics. This approach has also allowed Harris to place Scottish experience within a wider analytical framework, to emphasize the way Scottish politics across the spectrum – in terms of identity, strategy and relationships – increasingly became part of a new British politics. The book thus goes a long way towards filling some of the gaps in our understanding of the political culture of the 1790s. It is clear, concise and thoroughly-researched, and while more could undoubtedly be said about certain topics, Harris’s intention here is to provide a better understanding of the basic structures of politics and debate in this period as a preliminary to further, more narrowly focused studies. This is an excellent groundwork indeed, and more innovative work on late eighteenth-century Scottish politics is sure to follow.

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