
*Impaled Upon A Thistle: Scotland Since 1880* is a sweeping narrative of Scotland's political history from 1880 to the year 2000. This time frame overlaps more traditional historical chronology, where the ‘long nineteenth century’ extends to 1914 and the onset of World War I, and is followed immediately by the short twentieth century, which ends with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Cameron introduces the period with the collapse of the City of Glasgow Bank on October 2, 1878, but even before that, the Liberal Party was in decline after decades in power. Liberal Party politics and politicians versus the rise of liberalism in Scottish society is the book’s central theme. Debates about devolution, nationalism and Unionism are embedded in every aspect of Scottish society, and are at the heart of most political moves undertaken during the period.

The book is organized in two parts: before and after 1945. The first chapters in each part are important to context: chapters on social and economic conditions at the beginning of each part set up the period with some necessary references to its recent past. Each part covers political, economic, and social themes. Topics overlap in ways that allow the author to highlight their connections in time and place. For example, Cameron introduces unionism as a political movement that began in Scotland in the 1880s that was influenced by the Irish Home Rule question. The development and solidification of this political ideology was complicated by historical actors (Highland crofters, radical and conservative politicians) and events (the Boer War of 1899-1902, the
Scottish election of 1900). Unionism persisted through the post-World War II period, and was complicated by contemporary religion, gender, and political ideologies.

Cameron effectively contrasts ‘Liberalism’ (a declining force in Scottish politics throughout the twentieth century) with ‘liberalism’ throughout the book, using supporting themes of rising secularism, education, population changes and demographic transition, and urbanization and its attendant demands for affordable housing for workers and their families. Since 1945, a social revolution in Scotland resulted in fundamental internal changes: Cameron notes in particular transformations in gender and occupational roles and the traditional family, secularization and the loss of faith in organized religion, and mobility of individuals. One of the most interesting pieces of this puzzle is the effect of migration patterns of Scots and others, into and out of the country, and the resulting stress on established social norms. Cameron emphasizes that these post-World War II challenges are global, facilitated by transportation and communication technologies. In his concluding chapters, he suggests that ‘innovation and continuity’ together will be necessary to move Scotland into the future. While he is specifically describing the new Scottish Parliament of 2007, and struggle over Scottish self-government, which he feels must continue with the election of a minority Scottish National Party (SNP) administration, this kind of social and political dichotomy has shaped Scottish history since 1880.

Cameron is a skilled story-teller, able to weave simultaneous strands of history together: the politics of Scotland as a stand-alone theme, but also Scotland relative to England, Ireland and Wales in the larger geographic context of British and European politics. These themes are integral to Scottish politics, and the book gives a wonderful sense of the development of industrialization, trade unionism and labour relations, urbanization, secularization, education, and the development of national identities following the colonialism of
the nineteenth century. Cameron portrays Scotland as a country actively searching for self-identity as well as a place in the wider world.

Cameron’s narrative includes several useful tools for readers at several levels of scholarly interest and expertise to engage in Scottish history. Statistics and tables are used judiciously, and descriptive narrative is used to flesh out the skeletal framework offered by tabulated data: names, events, times and places. ‘Sidebars’ are interspersed throughout: particular anecdotes are given a microhistorical treatment, and offer a closer, more intimate look at the repercussions of political history to real people (and some animals—the ‘Turra Coo,’ p. 97) in the middle of it. The bibliography is comprehensive and multi-disciplinary; Cameron draws widely on both British and Scottish historical and sociological literature to give a full scholarly profile to Scottish history up to the first decade of the twenty-first century.

It can be difficult to determine the historical value of a volume that ends with living people and current events. Cameron is well aware of the complexity of past, present, and future, and the need to make some sense of the long-term consequences of Scottish politics on Scottish economic and social history. This is the tenth and final volume in the New Edinburgh History of Scotland and offers a concluding scholarly treatment of Scottish history since Roman Caledonia. This volume can also stand alone as an absorbing and insightful history of modern Scottish politics for the reader who is not a scholar of Scottish history.

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