Review


This third and final volume of the History of the Scottish Parliament series has—in common with other works resulting from its parent venture, The History of the Scottish Parliament Project—much to commend it. Unlike its two predecessors, this volume seeks to take a broad view of the institution throughout its history, encompassing its relations with other areas of governance and impact on the world beyond Parliament Hall. Sensibly, the editors Keith Brown and Alan MacDonald declare that the intent of the volume is “not to tell the whole story,” but rather to provoke new research, an aim which it should certainly achieve (p. xii).

The first four chapters discuss Parliamentary relations with a series of political institutions: Gillian MacIntosh and Roland Tanner address the Crown, Tanner returns alongside Kirsty McAlister to explore the Church, Keith Brown considers the nobility and Alan MacDonald, the burghs. Alastair Mann’s following chapter provides a useful overview of Parliamentary procedure, including a number of helpful diagrams demonstrating changes to the physical layout of Parliament. The final four chapters explore Parliament’s place in relation to more abstract concepts: Godfrey examining Parliament and the law, Mann’s second chapter discussing social control, Burns considering political ideas, and the final chapter, politics, being undertaken by Goodare.

Across the contributions by individual authors, one of this volume’s great strengths is its emphasis on the European context for developments in the Scottish Parliament. Whilst
comparisons with England are naturally frequent, authors also venture further afield, for instance, to the Iberian Peninsula. Such a wider European perspective, however, provides more than interesting comparisons: consideration of comparable bodies throughout the continent strengthens the volume’s case for the Scottish Parliament’s significance. This is a particularly noteworthy contention since it challenges widespread preconceptions that Scottish Parliament was an, at best useless, but at worst flawed, institution, whose history ended in the ignominious failure of voting for its own dissolution. A second major strength of this volume is a concern to break down old oppositional paradigms such as Parliament versus the crown, or Parliament versus the General Assembly. Unsurprisingly, this approach is particularly pronounced in the chapters by Brown and MacDonald, and those co-authored by Tanner and MacIntosh, and Tanner and McAlister. Similarly, an emphasis on a cross-over of personnel between estates within Parliament, such as clerics and nobles or between Parliament and other institutions, serves to demonstrate the extent to which Parliament was fully integrated into the rest of the body politic. Tensions over “the extent to which parliament possessed an exclusive right to legislate,” as explored by Godfrey, drive this point home (p. 176). Goodare’s discussion of types of political decision is a particularly salutary reminder that although Parliament was undoubtedly a key player in dramatic depositions and restorations of monarchs (as explored by Burns), the vast majority of its business was humdrum negotiation of everyday affairs.

In discussing well-rehearsed topics—such as tensions between Crown and Parliament or the role of the nobility in Parliament—at points, the volume veers towards providing an overview of existing research and a clarification of the current state of play rather than putting forward a strikingly new case. It may be that since this is the third volume in a series of
three, the influence of the two earlier volumes, and
superlative website, has already begun to be felt. It may also
be testimony to the influential nature of previous work by
well-established contributing authors; for example, Brown
resolutely reinforces his case for the fundamental continuity
and importance of noble power. Unfortunately, at points the
details of particular historical moments are lost, perhaps as a
result of the volume’s broad scope. For instance, the events of
February, 1525 are explained as follows: “Parliament oversaw
the transfer of the regency from the queen [Margaret Tudor]
to Archibald Douglas, sixth earl of Angus,” (pp. 12-13);
however, whilst power was certainly transferred in this
Parliament, neither Tudor nor Douglas were legally
constituted as regent since Parliament had declared that James
V’s minority had ended in August, 1524 (The Records of the
Parliaments of Scotland to 1707, K. M. Brown et al., eds. (St

In short, this volume alone will not radically alter how
Scottish historians think about Parliament, although it should
cause historians less familiar with Scotland to discard
outdated preconceptions. It emphasizes and reinforces
emergent themes in studies of the Scottish Parliament,
notably, that Parliament cannot be dismissed because it voted
itself out of existence in 1707, and the importance of
considering Parliament in its broader context both within
Scotland and amongst other European parliaments. In clearing
the ground of erroneous understandings of the institution,
contributors emphasize the importance of Parliament to
contemporary Scots as part of a broader political system, and
provide a clear overview of current thinking on many
important facets of Parliamentary history. Together, these
nine essays assert the broad framework of understanding
within which future studies will operate.

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