Review


Noble Power in Scotland is Keith Brown’s excellent, long-awaited sequel to Noble Society in Scotland: Wealth, Family and Culture from the Reformation to Revolution (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). Together these books challenge the view of mid-twentieth century historians that there was a crisis in the early modern Scottish nobility. In Noble Society in Scotland, Brown argues that between 1560 and 1637 the Scottish nobility became more entrepreneurial, adapted their family structures, embraced new educational opportunities, and in doing so preserved their dominant financial and social position in Scotland. In Noble Power in Scotland he sets out to prove that the Scottish nobility, secure in their financial and social success, were able to protect and even enhance their political power in the decades following the Scottish Reformation.

Eschewing an introduction, Brown launches right into his subject with a chapter on noble power and politics between 1560 and 1603. Organized thematically, this opening chapter assumes that the reader has a good grasp of the narrative of early modern Scottish political history. He begins by pointing out that royal authority in Scotland had taken a beating in the middle of the sixteenth century, starting with the early death of James V in 1542 and ending with the overthrow of Queen Mary in 1567. Mary’s abdication in favour of her infant son, James VI, hardly improved the
situation: a lengthy period of minority government led to numerous rebellions and widespread feuding amongst the nobility. Yet Brown maintains that the Scottish nobility was a naturally conservative lot and that what it craved most was stability; as James VI grew into adulthood amongst the nobility there was a growing “ambivalence towards resistance … an increasing disenchantment with religious politics and a growing unease at the escalation of feuding” (p. 34). Indeed, by the middle of the 1590s, the adult James VI had even acquired the political initiative in his kingdom. The 1590s, however, did not mark the beginning of the rise of the crown and the decline of noble power, but rather was a period that brought back into balance the traditional relationship of mutual dependence between king and nobles. James knew that his ability to rule rested on cooperation with the nobility.

Building on the work of European historians, and employing an impressive range of Scottish sources, Brown convincingly demonstrates in the following six chapters that early modern Scottish nobles continued to wield immense power in their local communities through their roles as chiefs of kindreds and clans, as lords of their affinities, and as magistrates in local courts. On a national level, military power remained in their hands; the king relied on them as privy councillors, officers of state, and judges; and the royal court continued to be dominated by them because, by their birth and education, they were the king’s natural companions. Yet for all this, the nobility knew that the advancement of their interests and those of their houses lay in cooperation with the king.

In his final chapter on noble power and politics from 1603 to 1637, Brown argues that the union of the Scottish, English, and Irish crowns in 1603 threatened to tip the balance of political authority in Scotland towards the crown. Following the move to London, “an increasingly self-confident crown sought to go further than previous Stewart
kings in cultivating a culture of obedience among the nobility, placing greater restraints on unacceptable noble behaviour and extending the king’s practical authority over religious beliefs and practices” (p. 209). Yet even here, any achievements won by the crown were accomplished with the cooperation of the nobility. After 1603 James VI was in a stronger position in relation to his nobility than any previous Scottish monarch, but he used that advantage judiciously. It was only under his politically incompetent successor, Charles I, that the cooperative relationship between crown and nobility collapsed and the nobility overthrew royal authority in Scotland by aligning with broader popular and national movements.

Brown’s primary thesis, that there was a continuity of noble power in early modern Europe, is not a new one: numerous historians have made the same point and he acknowledges that his book on Scotland “simply adds to the accumulation of data” on the subject (p. 246). However, this in no way diminishes his achievement: novelty in historical writing is vastly over-rated. As Brown rightly remarks, “most historians work by painstakingly adding to the findings of others,” and in this endeavour he has succeeded admirably (p. 246).

A secondary thesis, largely advanced in the final chapter, is that it was the breakdown in cooperation between Charles I and the Scottish nobility that led to the Scottish revolution. The revolution was not, he insists, a baronial revolt, but rather a noble-led revolt. This is a compelling argument, but Brown has not adequately developed it in this book. One hopes that this will be the subject of his next book.

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