Review


The cliché that history is written by the winners is especially pertinent for medieval Scottish history. To take one example, the military triumph of the dynasty of Malcolm Canmore in the High Middle Ages led to a tidying of the historical records in order to extend their supremacy back into the mists of the early medieval period. All victors, however, need someone to vanquish and John Marsden’s compelling Kings, Mormaers, Rebels: Early Scotland’s Other Royal Family tells another aspect of Scottish history, the account of the ultimately unsuccessful royal dynasty known in the earliest records as Cenél Loairn (‘Kindred of Loarn’). Early in the Middle Ages there was a kingdom called Dál Riata (extending from county Antrim in northeast Ireland across the North Channel to the southern Hebrides and Argyll) where there were several dominant clans, of which two—Cenél Loairn and Cenél nGabráín (‘Kindred of Gabran’)—battled for supremacy. From the latter emerged the Canmore dynasty and the Scots kings of the High Middle Ages, while Cenél Loairn produced a prince named Mac bethad. Kings, Mormaers, Rebels: Early Scotland’s Other Royal Family is a fascinating study of an obscure period together with the account of a rivalry that finds an echo in William Shakespeare’s drama Macbeth.

Writing a history that spans almost six centuries requires Marsden to juggle two themes: Scottish political history and the interpretation of the surviving records. History might be a record of what the writer thinks is important, but
those reasons are not always obvious after the passage of
centuries. This is clear when comparing early saints’ lives,
such as Adomnán’s *Life of Columba* or the Irish *Annals of Ulster*,
with the commentary of later writers, such as the
twelfth-century historian William of Newburgh. As he threads
his way through genealogies, chronicles, and miscellaneous
documents, Marsden carefully studies his source-materials
while writing a coherent narrative. Not surprisingly, the
uncomplicated picture of Scottish history that emerges from
the late medieval histories of John of Fordun and Andrew of
Wyntoun (and followed to the present day in popular
histories) is replaced by a more multifaceted narrative.

The story begins with information from a text called
‘History of the Men of Britain’ that gives genealogies, a
geographical survey, and a naval muster role of the clans of
Dál Riata. Cenél Loairn was situated in the northern part of
the kingdom round Oban and the Isle of Mull. The Irish
annals are clear that by the end of the seventh century Cenél
Loairn was supreme in Dál Riata and remained so (with
interruptions) into the second quarter of the eighth century.
Unfortunately for them, this ended with the assaults of an
eastern rival, the great Angus, whose campaign for supremacy
in Northern Britain led to a decade of attacks on Dál Riata.
Even though Angus was ultimately unsuccessful, the damage
seems to have convinced Cenél Loairn to emigrate, moving
up the Great Glen to the region round the Moray Firth.

Other than one possible exception (see appendix),
Cenél Loairn is not found in the records from the mid-eighth
until the late tenth/early eleventh century. When it reappears,
the clan is independent of their rivals and has a base of power
in Buchan. Now another picture emerges from a reading of
the occasional references gleaned from the Irish annals
together with notes preserved in the abridged Gospels, the
*Book of Deer*. Leaders of the war-bands had become the
owners of large estates and they demonstrated their piety with
donations to the church, which were recorded in the margins of manuscripts. These country squires, however, had abandoned none of their violent tendencies. When Findláech was killed by his nephews in 1020, the murder set off a train of violent events culminating in the supremacy of his son, whose literary namesake is Shakespeare’s Macbeth. While historians complain that the playwright took artistic liberties with his character, there can be no doubt that the career of the historical prince is one of the reasons why even the small amount of information about Cenél Loairn was preserved. Macbeth’s slaying of Duncan in 1040 was more than political, because the two men appear to have been cousins. The feud continued with Duncan’s son, Malcolm Canmore, and when Macbeth died in 1057 after defeating Malcolm in a battle at Lumphanan, the story resumed with his stepson Lulach, whose offspring carried on the feud with the descendants of Malcolm Canmore into the thirteenth century. Clan Lulaich (as Cenél Loairn became known) fought for almost two centuries to avoid political obscurity, but their rivals bested them on the battlefield and subsequently in the revision of history. Various pretenders appeared by the twelfth century claiming to be descendants of Cenél Loairn princes, of whom the most famous was Bishop Wimund of the Isles, who divided his time between episcopal duties and brigandage.

John Marsden has written a fascinating historical narrative for both the academic and general reader. The scholarship is first-rate, with research in the primary source materials supplemented by scholarly studies. He does not dodge the difficult problems or pretend that every question can be answered definitively. Equally important is his impartiality as he presents opposing views fairly and graciously. This is an important contribution to the literature on early Scotland.

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