Review


With only 219 pages of narrative, *Chartism in Scotland*, by W. Hamish Fraser, is a brief introduction into the way that working-class demands for suffrage played out from the 1780s until the 1860s. Like other radical changes to Scottish social and political culture, the subject of Scottish Chartism has not generated nearly as much scholarly interest as it has among English historians. However, recent attempts have been made to rectify this situation and there have been numerous localized studies of Chartist movements in Scotland published over the last few decades. One of the publishing companies leading the charge is Merlin Press, a Wales-based company that has released a series on Chartist Studies. *Chartism in Scotland* attempts to synthesize some of the prior results to come out of the series. Fraser does not claim to engage with all of the key material on Chartism but his efforts do constitute an important step in contextualizing Scottish Chartism within the U.K., North America, and parts of Europe.

*Chartism in Scotland* is straightforward to understand and is written in the engaging tone and narrative that one has come to expect from Fraser. For scholars of working-class suffrage, this book provides a handy glossary of important people—such as James Moir, Rev. Patrick Brewster, Hugh Craig, and George Ross—and organizations that defined the movement including the National Charter Association, Chartist Churches, and Universal Suffrage Central
Committee. The book also neatly situates the Chartist Movement in Scotland in terms of other key developments of the period, such as Anti-Corn Law League, Irish Repeal Movement, and religious calls for temperance, as well as other church reforms. Fraser’s stylistic capabilities hide many key faults in the actual evidence used to construct his overarching narrative. While beneficial as a primary source for Chartist newspapers, this book does not offer anything new to readers anticipating a critical analysis. Likely due to publication limitations, *Chartism in Scotland* seems to struggle at the beginning as it rushes through the important grass roots organizations of the late-eighteenth century. Fraser also does not do justice to the complicated social and political culture of Scotland leading up to the 1832 Reforms. The narrative only really picks up after 1836, which is where the monograph probably should have begun.

Primarily, this is less a story of how Chartism played out as a whole than it is about how the issue played out in Scottish urban centers such as Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Dumfries, and Glasgow. The book contends that it offers new approaches to the subjects of ‘culture’ and the ‘role of women’. However, the role of women seems to be added just as a cursory side note; it seems a bit hyperbolic of the publisher to call it a new approach. In terms of his source base, Fraser mostly relies on press clippings and the minutes from council meetings, which is typical of the way that Chartism has traditionally been understood. One walks away somewhat disappointed that *Chartism in Scotland* is not the wide-ranging analysis that the subject deserves. Unfortunately, until demand for such studies increases, publishing companies and Scottish scholars like Fraser will be limited in their ability to truly engage with the subject in the way that it has been in England.
Ultimately, Fraser argues against the conventional view that the push for Chartism was more moderate in Scotland than it was in England. This is a problematic claim since the evidence backing it up is still very slim. For instance, it seems very premature to point to 1836 as the “Coming of the Charter” when there were many significant changes to Scottish political culture between then and 1848. This reviewer would have liked to see more analysis in the introduction and conclusion, since the book seems to deny Fraser the chance to ruminate on the subject with the thorough lens of a seasoned scholar.

The back cover claims, “In the forty years since the last full-scale study of Chartism in Scotland, Chartist Studies have been transformed.” However, this reviewer is hesitant to agree with this statement. I am not convinced that Chartism in Scotland transforms Chartist Studies in the way the publisher claims it does. Rather than transforming the subject, I suggest that this latest broad-scale study will play a role in strengthening prior conceptions about the extent of Scottish political and social moderation. There is no doubt that the book is a valuable overview of the subject; however, it would perhaps be more genuine to indicate that Chartism in Scotland is a history of the way that prominent Scots and the Scottish press reacted to the legislative changes for the working-class.

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