
The question of Scotland’s relationship to the rest of Europe is not a new one, and numerous articles and books have appeared in recent years which explore the connections between medieval and early modern Scotland and its European neighbours. David Ditchburn’s latest book contributes a great deal to this discussion, and succeeds in overturning any impression that later medieval Scotland was an isolated and backwards kingdom clinging precariously onto the very edge of Europe.

The time frame of this book, as indicated in the title, reveals a great deal both about Ditchburn’s approach and about the status of the question of Scotland’s proper place in European civilization. The dates given in the subtitle on the front cover and spine of the book are 1214 and 1560. These correspond to a conventional dating of Scottish history, with 1214 marking the beginning of Alexander II’s reign and 1560 being one of the traditional dates for the Scottish Protestant Reformation. By contrast, the dates given with the subtitle on the title page are 1215 and 1545. Ditchburn states in his Preface that it is this second set of dates which properly delineates the temporal boundaries of the book, so these are presumably the ones he meant to have on the cover. The choice of the years 1215 and 1545 as the beginning and end points of the study rather than the more traditionally Scottish 1214 and 1560 indicates a conscious avoidance of the boundaries of traditional national histories: the year 1215 was the year of the Fourth Lateran Council, and 1545 was the convening of the Council of Trent, neither event being situated in Scotland. By highlighting the importance to Scotland of these events which took place outside of the country, Ditchburn is insisting that Scotland be considered as part of a larger picture. By choosing dates associated not only with places outside of Scotland but also with religious events, Ditchburn is also connecting Scotland not only to the modern and geographically defined continent of Europe, but more generally with the medieval identity of Christendom.
Perhaps the (accidental?) inclusion of the more ‘Scottish’ dates on the cover betrays some unwillingness on the part of the publisher to abandon completely the more traditional system of dating.

Ditchburn’s choice of the more ‘European’ dates is consistent with the guiding theory of the book, which is that Scotland was a full participant in European society. This theory, trans-national as it is, has not precluded a Scotland-centred approach. Unlike many European histories, which consider Scotland to be peripheral and which, when confronted with any aspects of Scottish society which differ from those in the more central regions like France and Italy, pronounce Scotland to be the exception to the European trend, Ditchburn’s book looks at the Scottish experience as being as normative as any other country’s. Scotland is taken as the starting point for each subject being investigated, and comparisons with other regions of Europe are drawn not to show how similar to or different from the European norm Scotland was, but to explore the ways in which Scotland was linked with other countries. There is no norm presupposed here: each region is different and deserves to be considered in its own terms.

The book is organized along thematic lines, with chapters covering Transport and Travel, The Religious Bonds, The Cultural Bonds, The Economic Bonds, and Perceptions of Scotland by others in medieval Christendom. In some ways, it would make sense to read this final chapter first, for it provides the reader with a survey of how late medieval and early modern Scots presented themselves to others, and of how others perceived the Scots. Readers would probably find it interesting to note how similar these perceptions were to what modern perceptions are concerning Scotland’s place in European society: Scotland was remote, poor, and suffering from conflict with its hostile neighbour to the south. On the other hand, if the reader reads the chapters in sequence he or she will know by the time that last chapter is reached that those perceptions are largely untrue.

A particular strength of this book is that it takes account not only of recent Scottish scholarship, but also of work concentrating on other areas of Europe such as the Low Countries, Germany, and France. Each work consulted is carefully noted in the footnotes, so that those interested in pursuing more detailed study into any area covered by Ditchburn can easily discover how to learn more. The bibliography is also extensive and of
great use to anyone wishing to read further. The obvious display of scholarship should not, however, in any way discourage the more casual reader or the reader not well acquainted with later medieval and early modern Scottish history from picking up Scotland and Europe. Ditchburn does a good job of providing a short but adequate introduction to every subject he covers, and avoids using scholarly jargon of historians without explaining his terms. He also does a very good job of humanizing the evidence he presents, often presenting humorous anecdotes from the past. The chapter on The Economic Bonds for example, the very title of which may deter readers not yet convinced that a chapter on economic history promises anything interesting, opens with a description of a meal eaten in 1450 by William, earl of Douglas, while visiting the duke of Burgundy:

The menu included beef, veal, mutton, pork, two hares, ten pheasant, one heron, four bittern, 156 rabbits, seventy-two partridge, ten geese, twelve water birds, thirty-four dozen lark, twenty-two capons, 231 chickens and fifty-six brace of pigeon. The selection of vegetables was more limited: cabbage, though cheese and patisserie were also served. There were a further loaves and 120 rolls (both brown and white) to accompany the meal, which was garnished with mustard, onion, parsley, milk, cream, butter, salt, pepper, verjuice, vinegar and aspic jelly. Presumably too there was much drink: the ingredients of the aspic jelly alone included a liberal dose of white wine. (p. 138)

From here Ditchburn launches into a discussion of the development of a pan-European aristocratic palate; cultural and religious factors which shaped eating and drinking habits; aspects of climate and war, politics and disease which affected the availability of food; and the trade links established between Scotland and the rest of Europe which facilitated the exchange of fish, wine, spices, and the non-foodstuffs. Readers are introduced to the topics under consideration throughout the book in a similar manner, with Ditchburn presenting interesting anecdotes from Scotland, and working outwards to explain the wider forces at work. This is consistently accomplished through a writing style which is much more lively and altogether readable than one
often finds in such rigorously academic work.

In addition to surveying and synthesizing an impressively wide array of scholarship, Ditchburn also presents some of his own original interpretations of current historical issues. By examining the ‘cosmopolitan’ trend in late medieval Scottish devotional practices, for example, he questions the extent to which the fifteenth century witnessed in Scotland a ‘nationalistic’ trend in religion and concludes that the supposed effects of nationalism on piety have been exaggerated. Even more significantly, Ditchburn’s argument that late medieval Scotland was not severely economically depressed flies in the face of the commonly unquestioned assumption that the later Middle Ages were overall a particularly unfortunate time for Scotland.

Some might feel that Ditchburn underestimates somewhat the distinctiveness of different regions within Scotland itself in his efforts to demonstrate the strength of the ties between Scotland and other countries in Europe. “Arguably it was little more difficult for a student from Aberdeenshire to reach Leuven than it was to reach St Andrews”, he tells us (p. 236), and of course he is correct. He does not take much account, however, of the fact that someone living in Skye could probably have conversed more easily with someone in Ireland than with an Edinburgh burgess, or that parishioners in a remote Highland parish who rarely saw a priest would likely have had a very different interaction with the universal Church than a person living in a cathedral town. One’s status as literate or illiterate, Gaelic or English-speaker, burgess or country-dweller would have informed many aspects of a medieval or early-modern Scot’s life, and perhaps not enough is made of this in Scotland and Europe. The book would also benefit from a brief conclusion summarizing the findings of all the chapters and advancing some general thoughts on to what extent and in what ways Scotland contributed to European civilization and how in turn Scotland was most influenced by other parts of Christendom. This last bit of criticism is perhaps premature, however, since a general conclusion is planned for the forthcoming second volume which will cover Scotland’s political ties with Europe. Based on the many strengths of the present volume, its companion is eagerly awaited.

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