The American scholar Arthur Herman has taken on the daunting task of arguing that Scots culture and society is responsible for the success and wealth of the Modern World. In the preface, Herman states rather boldly that, “being Scottish is more than just a matter of nationality or place of origin or clan or even culture. It is also a state of mind, a way of viewing the world and our place in it.” The pinnacle of his argument is that, “a large part of the world turns out to be ‘Scottish’ without realizing it.” (p. vii) If nothing else, Herman’s bold and broad assumption merits attention. His argument is broken up into several categories in which he finds Scottish genius behind nearly every university, philosophy, diaspora, and literary achievement in the Modern World. While going beyond the traditional Scots heroes like Wallace, Fleming, Watt, Burns and Robert the Bruce, he also reveals the many other inventors, thinkers, and scholars from North Britain who have made an indelible mark on the Modern World. The reader should be cautious though, in that most of Herman’s sources are in fact already celebratory of Scotland in the first place. This seems to be the most critical influence on Herman’s writing.

“Part one: epiphany” (pp. 13-191) is laced with interesting anecdotes from the annals of Scotland’s philosophical, religious and political histories. These anecdotes serve as the basis of Herman’s argument that those aspects of Modern society are intimately drawn from a wealth of Scottish heritage. So many anecdotes and ‘connections’ are made so as to convince the reader that this influence is more than just mere coincidence, but in fact, we are all directly influenced by the Scots.

Herman argues that the three centres of “civilizing and modernizing activity” were Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh. Yet, it was the latter two that became the “twin cities” of enlightenment and change” in the late 1700s. Glasgow was the “more innovative and practical” of the two while Edinburgh was the “more artistic and literary, more intellectual in the abstract sense.” (p. 161) It seems as though Adam Smith is the hero of the day and from this point in the book forward, as the rest of Herman’s argument builds upon several quotations from Wealth of Nations (pp. 195-6). This is most noticeable in his argument
that the New World was in fact a Scots creation (see chapter nine, “That Great Design” - Scots in America).

Part Two - Diaspora (pp. 194-361) is where Herman illustrates the Scots legacy in the New World. Herman spends a majority of his argument on diaspora in America. Other areas of settlement, including Canada and India are given attention, but it seems unbalanced compared to his treatment of the United States. This is most clearly revealed in the lack of sources used for the Canadian section of this study. Relying upon an outdated Canadian history text, his understanding of Scots identity in Canada seems shadowed by his willingness to trumpet the achievements of the Scots in the United States, particularly their part in the establishment of various Ivy League colleges and in American Revolution (see Sources, pp. 369-371, 374-376.)

Herman’s sources reveal a varied assortment of secondary literature, but also reveal little to no primary research. More often than not, Herman relies upon T.M. Devine (The Scottish Nation, 1999) for general history, and neglects to mention any of the other Scottish History masters who have put forth wonderful general histories, such as Michael Lynch’s Scotland: a New History (1991). In particular, his research into the Scots in Canada is somewhat dated and cites only the late Stanford Reid as a source for the subject. While the work of Reid is invaluable to the study of Scots diaspora in Canada, other sources abound and should also be relied upon. Much has been written since the 1970s on the Scots in Canada and a wealth of information is available on more specific settlement in Canada; for example, J.I. Little’s treatment of the Scots in Lower Canada.

Herman’s attempt at proving that we are all affected by Scots culture, intellectual life and society is noted. While the claims and arguments are at first impressive, they lack any kind of primary evidence and rely largely on outdated secondary literature. Reliance upon celebratory histories can only result in fantastic and enthusiastic support that the Scots did in fact invent the Modern World! Segments of this work might prove useful in a historiography class to study Whig history. However, it should not serve as a tool of the academic. An enjoyable read, highly entertaining and engaging, this is an excellent read for anyone who has a love of Scots culture, history and philosophy.

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