SOMERLED AND THE
EMERGENCE OF GAELIC SCOTLAND

Map. Plates. £16.99 (Paperback)

John Marsden is the author of a number of popular history books on early Scotland and Northumbria, including Alba of the Ravens (1997) and Northanhymbre Saga: The History of the Anglo-Saxon Kings of Northumbria (1995). In his most recent work, Somerled and the Emergence of Gaelic Scotland, he turns his attention to the western seaboard of Scotland to tackle the life and times of the mighty Hebridean sea-king who perished in an invasion of the Scottish mainland in 1164 and whose descendants continued to rule in the west until the late fifteenth century. In so doing, Marsden is dipping his oars into a rising tide of historical interest in not just Somerled, but the broader, related, phenomenon of Celtic Scotland in the medieval period.

The author’s stated motivation for writing the book is the lack of any full-length studies dealing with Somerled. However, given the increased amount of work by historians dealing with Argyll and the Isles over the past decade or so, including one book-length study of the region between 1100 and 1336, it remains to be seen whether Marsden has anything new to say about the subject (of which more anon). Marsden’s aim in writing the book is clearly laid out in the preface, where he states that he hopes to provide ‘the fullest possible portrait of Somerled as an historical personality in his own right rather than as a prologue to the subsequent history of the Lordship [of the Isles]…’ (p.ix). This is laudable as far as it goes, although historians now no longer view Somerled as a mere prologue to the later Lordship, and such a reprimand is not in keeping with the most recent historical scholarship on the subject.

The book is divided into seven chapters, which deal more or
less chronologically with Somerled’s origins, ancestry and rise to power; his challenge to the Canmore kings of Scots; his war with the Manx kings; his invasion of the Clyde and his death; his patronage of Iona, and a concluding chapter on ‘The Long Shadow of Somhairle Mor.’ The text is peppered with quotations from contemporary sources, which not only help to provide a sense of how we know what we know about this difficult period, but also allow the reader to feel more directly connected to events by hearing what contemporaries (and later clan historians) had to say about them. On the other hand, many of the quotations – some of which run to almost two pages of text – are too long, and readers would have been better served by their more judicious use.

Marsden has, however, done his homework in the preparation of the book. The bibliography is solid, and the author utilizes the major primary and secondary sources throughout. The book can, therefore, certainly be recommended as a good overview of, and introduction to, the topic, and Marsden does a solid job of discussing the changing perspectives on Somerled across the centuries, right up to the recent blossoming of material on the topic in the 1980s and 1990s. Nonetheless, it has to be said that the book contributes little to the overall debate on the subject – its real value lies rather in its ability to synthesize existing material and present a straightforward narrative of events.

It is the provocative subtitle of the work that may well draw the most criticism. Marsden seeks to demonstrate, as he says in the preface, that Somerled was ‘the one figure who, more than any other, represents the first fully-fledged emergence of the medieval Celtic-Scandinavian cultural province from which modern Gaelic Scotland is ultimately descended’ (p.x).

On the one hand, it is difficult to argue against the view that Somerled’s rise to power is rooted firmly in the medieval Celtic-Scandinavian cultural province, and also that the delineation of Gaelic Scotland really only begins in the middle ages, perhaps in the twelfth century (most would say later). It is also difficult to disagree that Somerled cast a very long shadow over the subsequent history of the highlands and islands. But the question is, ought we to regard Somerled and the cultural province
from which he was sprung as the precursor to modern Gaelic Scotland? To do so is to ignore several crucial points. First, in its strictest sense, the origins of Gaelic Scotland lie in the migration of Gaelic speakers (the Scots of Dalriada) from Northern Ireland to the west coast of Scotland some six centuries before Somerled’s birth. So in a sense, Marsden relegates to the sidelines six hundred years of important political and cultural developments that include the takeover of Pictland by the Scots of Dalriada in the ninth century and the territorial expansion of the new kingdom of Alba in the tenth to twelfth centuries. Indeed, as a number of works have demonstrated, this new kingdom of Alba itself represented a crucial phase in the formation of a new Scottish identity.

Second, and as Marsden himself is well aware, Somerled’s cultural milieu was not purely Gaelic but rather mixed Gaelic-Scandinavian; even Somerled’s name was Norse and means ‘Summer sailor’ or ‘Viking.’ To regard Somerled as a phenomenon of Gaelic Scotland is to ignore the very milieu from which he was sprung, and is, I think, to read backwards from the sentiments of the later clan historians into the much more complicated situation of the twelfth century. Somerled would certainly not have viewed himself as a champion of Gaelic Scotland, a view that is sometimes taken by historians but is not, in fairness, championed by Marsden.

Another difficulty with Marsden’s argument is that it also ignores key developments in the period following Somerled’s demise: arguably, subsequent developments among his descendants, and especially during the period of the Lordship of the Isles, did as much to shape the development of Gaelic Scotland as did Somerled himself. To attempt to demonstrate a linear development from the time of Somerled in the twelfth century up until the twentieth is to forget subsequent developments and to succumb to a very linear view of history.

In Somerled and the Emergence of Gaelic Scotland, John Marsden has produced a brief, readable, and interesting introduction to this great twelfth-century sea-king and his life and times. Although not all of Marsden’s arguments convince, the book can still be recommended as a sound introduction to the topic
for the general reader; academics will find little of real value here. Finally, before you rush out to purchase this book, be warned: actually obtaining a copy might prove to be difficult! At the time of writing, searches for the book at several internet bookstores, including Indigo.ca and Chapters.ca, were unsuccessful, while Amazon.com indicated that it had yet to be published!

Readers desperate to obtain this book will have to order from British internet sites like amazon.co.uk or jamesthin.co.uk, or else contact the publisher directly at tuckwellpress.co.uk. It is to be hoped that this book (like other Tuckwell titles) will become more widely available in North America, where it will no doubt appeal to all of those interested in Scottish studies.

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