Historians have traditionally portrayed the border lands of late medieval England and Scotland as hopelessly ungovernable regions of their respective kingdoms. Perceptions of chaotic raids and counter-raids, of the machinations of families constantly at feud, and of widespread lawlessness first began to inform the historiography of the borders in the sixteenth century, and until recently have remained remarkably persistent in scholarly and popular writing. In this work, a recasting of his doctoral dissertation, Alastair Macdonald sets out to debunk many of the myths that have so deeply coloured the history of the border lands. Although in some respects a dense and, at times, impenetrable book, Macdonald’s effort is commendable for its attention to detail and its thorough assessment of surviving record materials.

Macdonald pursues a single, well-articulated theme throughout the book. He argues that, despite the enduring opinion of some historians, Anglo-Scottish warfare in the period between the accession of King Robert II in 1371 and the year 1403 ‘was absolutely driven by the Scots’ (p. 1). Related to this central claim are challenges to two equally persistent beliefs about the border lands of England and Scotland, namely that the disorder of the region was a reflection of the evils of overmighty subjects and that it was a consequence of the inability of the central governments of the two realms to control feuding among magnate families. Macdonald’s view is that both arguments are seriously weakened when the ‘bigger picture’ is taken into account. Thus, he explores the involvement of the
Scots not only in war with the English, but also in alliance with the French.

The book is divided into two sections. The first (and longer) consists of a survey of the dozens of raids, forays and formal campaigns that occurred in the border lands between 1371 and 1403. The endless recital of these incidents makes for dry reading; of greater interest here are the footnotes, which reveal just how meticulously the author searched a plethora of extant record material in constructing his chronology. Although Macdonald constantly reminds his reader that the hand of the Scottish crown is clearly visible behind the incursions, great and small, his arguments about the consistency of governmental control are not altogether convincing. Robert II does indeed appear to have lived up to the image he shaped for himself as a ‘defender of the integrity of the Scottish realm’ and an aggressive champion of his territorial claims. Under his overall direction the Scots undertook an ultimately successful campaign to re-conquer English-held lands in the east, central and west marches. From 1377 Scottish attacks on England increased in intensity, and collectively their success helped to ensure that the smaller realm remained very much an active player in its relations with England and France. Macdonald makes a compelling case for arguing that, during the 1370s and ’80s at least, Scottish military activity reflected a unity of design and purpose on the part of the crown and its magnates that Robert II’s biographers have seldom acknowledged. The decisions to escalate war in 1385 and again in 1388 were made entirely by the Scots, without reference to circumstances in England or in France, and when the forces of Douglas and Percy clashed at Otterburn in 1388, the Scottish victory was much more a tangible expression of the cohesion of royal and baronial forces than it was a mere episode, however glorious, in a purely personal feud between border magnates.

The 1390s, however, saw a reversal in Scottish fortunes and, simultaneously, a cessation of the constant raiding that had characterised the previous two decades. Scotland was isolated as a consequence of the retreat of the English and French crowns from open war, and in this decade ‘the cautious planning
evident during Robert III’s reign would be replaced by a generous measure of recklessness’ (p.118). Despite Macdonald’s contention that the Scottish government (variously led by King Robert III or his ambitious brother) remained firmly in control of Anglo-Scottish affairs generally and border warfare more particularly, he finds it difficult to assemble strong evidence in support of this claim.

Deeply troubled by internal dissension and frozen out of the Anglo-French détente, the crown was powerless to do anything more than ‘tolerate’ the raids and forays of its chief border lords. More damaging still to Macdonald’s central thesis is his choice of 1403, rather than 1406 (the year in which King Robert III died) as the year in which to conclude his detailed study. In 1403, following the rebellion of the Percy family, the English government began to alter its northern policies. In designating that date as a turning point in border history Macdonald emphasizes the leading role that English governmental decisions played in border politics, and portrays the Scottish government as marginal, able merely to respond to changes effected by its powerful neighbour. Problematic also is Macdonald’s admission in Chapter 4 (an admission that then becomes a major theme of the concluding chapters) that the year 1399 in fact marked a more significant watershed than did 1403 in the direction of the war effort. If this was the case, one wonders why the author did not identify the accession of Henry IV as a terminal point for his study.

In the two final chapters Macdonald steps back from a purely narrative description of events to a more thoughtful examination of the ways in which border warfare shaped the lives and the culture of southern Scotland and northern England. This portion of the book is worth the price of its purchase. In an attempt to understand why war between England and Scotland should have been as long-lasting and as destructive as it was, the author sets out to explore the motives of the men who fought. Carefully noting that ‘the distinction between private and public motivations is blurred’ (p. 168) he nevertheless offers several explanations for the willingness of the crown and its subjects to devote so much time, energy and expense against a large and
formidable enemy. Governmental motivations are defined here chiefly as the successful assertion of the independence that the Scots had achieved in 1328 but which the English crown thereafter chose to ignore and, more obviously, the prospect of re-conquering lands in the borders occupied by the English. Private reasons were many and varied, some ‘rational’, others not, including the chivalric desire for glory and booty, patriotism, attachment to the notion of the feud and retaliation against a bitter enemy of long standing. Religious sentiment may also have been a factor here, but Macdonald does not elaborate on just how the Schism that began in 1378 could have been meaningful to the mass of the Scottish soldiery.

While ‘those who fought in the Anglo-Scottish wars did so for a complex of reasons’ (p.194), there can be little doubt that the existence of a near-perpetual state of war exerted a profound influence on border society. In his last chapter Macdonald once again challenges long-held notions, this time about the unity of belief that English and Scottish borderers are supposed to have shared, and succeeds in making a compelling case for treating the Scottish border lands as a region quite distinct from their English counterparts. The circumstances that collectively bred in the English marches profound feelings of alienation from the Westminster government are not, he shows, applicable to the Scottish border lands. Moreover, there did not exist the ‘raiding culture’ so beloved of Walter Scott and his imitators, though Macdonald admits that his argument cannot really be sustained for the period after 1399. Similarly, the acculturation that is said to have occurred among English and Scottish frontier dwellers, popularised in the ballad literature of the sixteenth century, ‘is not clearly evident until after 1399’ (p. 235).

Despite its rather lurid title Macdonald’s book will be of real interest to historians of Anglo-Scottish relations in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The author has made remarkably good use of a sometimes bewildering variety of primary source materials, many of them hidden away in remote corners of record offices local and national. His use of secondary sources, however, is rather more limited. In the course of the last two decades the history of the border regions has attracted the
attention of a growing number of English and Scottish historians. Aspects of their culture, politics and legal peculiarities have been subjected to careful scrutiny and the findings of many scholars are generally in agreement with Macdonald’s. A more concerted effort to include the work of some of these other scholars would have given his book greater breadth and depth.

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