Ian D. Whyte’s new book is the first Scottish volume to be published in MacMillan’s Social History in Perspective series. It is a detailed and comprehensive examination of the social and economic history of Scotland in the early modern period, introducing the reader not only to the most recent research findings, but also to many of the debates which are current in the field.

Whyte has chosen to structure his book around themes rather than chronology. Indeed, there is a conscious attempt to ignore the traditional political framework, as can be seen in the very title of the book. The author eschews those great organising dates of political history, 1560, 1603, 1707, and 1745, in order to avoid breaking up the picture of economic and social change and continuity. Instead the book is organised around the important relationships which marked Scottish society, with chapters on “Lord and Laird”, “Landlord and Tenant”, “Kirk and Culture”, “Centre and Locality”, “Highland and Lowland”, and “Town and Country”. A final chapter on “Economic Decline and Growth” ties together the themes covered in the rest of the book. There is much to be said for this type of organisation, although readers unfamiliar with the political history of Scotland might find the discussion confusing in places.

A particular strength of the book is the author’s very clear discussions of areas of debate among recent historians. Among the topics he discusses are the changing views of king-magnate relations in the late middle ages, the causes of the Scottish Revolution, the debate about the primacy of economic or political
factors leading to the Union of 1707, the causes of eighteenth-century economic growth, and the extent of urbanisation in early modern Scotland, the last being a topic to which the author himself has made significant contributions.

Particularly useful for non-Scottish readers is the way in which Whyte places his discussion of Scottish developments in the context of the wider area of British and European history. He points out, for example, that the growth in urbanisation in early modern Scotland was among the most extensive in Europe. He discusses the Scottish Revolution in the larger context of what European historians have labelled “the seventeenth-century crisis”. He also points out areas in which Scotland was unique. The Convention of Royal Burghs gave the royal burghs a collective voice in national politics which was stronger than their European counterparts, while the extent to which the nobility continued to be strongly identified with their locality well into the early modern period stood in sharp contrast to contemporary England.

For potential students of the period, Whyte has performed a valuable service in identifying those areas which are crying out for further research. For example, he points out the need for more individual community studies, of the types which are being carried out in other countries for this period, and suggests the value of the Kirk Session registers and estate papers for such research. He argues that such communities are “family communities” rather than “local communities” (pp 69-70). He is also clear about some of the difficulties of research, arguing for instance that the academic study of the Highlands has been hampered by modern historians’ unfamiliarity with the Celtic cultural past.

The format of the series means that the length of individual volumes is quite restricted. Inevitably this has led to some areas receiving less attention than they perhaps deserve. It would have been useful to hear more about the pre-Reformation church, so that readers could assess the extent to which the Reformation changed religious practice and belief. More could be said about women, a topic to which the author has made several important contributions elsewhere. A second problem is that the discussion
of each topic covered is necessarily densely packed with detail in order to conserve space. This may make the book less accessible for a general audience, although the final chapter does provide a more generalised overview of the period. Finally, the use of social science format for the references - author and date only - is not helpful; some indication of the relevant page numbers or sections would be useful.

Overall, the book provides a valuable overview of a neglected topic in Scottish historiography and students interested in the economic and social history of early modern Scotland will find much here of interest. If it encourages further research in the field, one of the primary goals of the author will have been met.

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