The Origins of Scottish Nationhood

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Scotland: The Challenge of Devolution

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The 1999 re-convening of the Scottish Parliament, after 292 years, forms the explicit focus of Scotland: The Challenge of Devolution, a collection of brief but informative essays exploring the new institutional contexts and possibilities of Scottish politics. Drawn from a 1999 conference which took place just months after the Parliament re-convened, some contributions in this collection already seem somewhat dated, all the more given recent indications of growing public disillusionment and re-assessment of the hopes many invested in the heady events of 1999. Some of the essays describe the new framework for administration; others underscore the continuing anomalies within the government of the United Kingdom, the “West Lothian question” now having become an “English” and wider “British question”. The thematic structure of the collection provides very useful internal coherence, and two sections in particular, “Part IV: Inter-Governmental Relations: Ireland - E.U. - Global” and “Part VI: Devolution, Economic, and the U.K. Territorial Project” explore causes and consequences of the re-configuration of the U.K.’s political map on internal political dynamics, relations with Ireland, and between constituent parts.
of the United Kingdom, Europe and the wider world. The issues raised in these sections may assume greater salience in the months and years ahead. Parts of Scotland: The Challenge of Devolution may already form part of the historiography of Scotland circa 1999, given much that has since changed, but this collection nonetheless serves as a very useful, coherent and reasonably comprehensive survey of Scottish politics at the dawn of a new era.

The same events foreground Neil Davidson’s problematique of Scottish national consciousness, which begins by interrogating why the apparent rise of national consciousness has not seen a concurrent rise in support for “capital-N” nationalism in Scotland. Davidson’s analysis takes aim at the approaches of historians such as Richard Findlay, who has located national consciousness in a longer continuum, and Graeme Morton, who has argued that the Scottish nation existed, and was even nurtured, outwith state structures. Indeed, Davison argues that the development of a specifically Scottish national consciousness took place in the mid- to late-eighteenth century, as a companion to capitalist development and reformist, rather than revolutionary, class consciousness. This analysis posits three discrete phases of national development, and then relates this theory to the Scottish experience.

The first phase involves “psychological formation” (1450-1688), during which a feudal society adapts to emergent capitalism, standardised idioms become part of requisite communication links, and an absolutist state develops in response to power shifts within the social structure; the “geographical extension” (1688-1789) involves the establishment of the nation-state in its approximate modern form; and “social diffusion” (1789-1848), involving the legitimating of national consciousness throughout the social structure. In the Scottish case, Davison borrows, and then refines (or reduces) the thesis advanced by Linda Colley in exploring the evolution of a hybrid Scottish-British identity in the post-Union period. Flatly rejecting the importance which Colley ascribes to Protestantism, conflict with France, and the monarchy, Davidson sees Scottish participation in the Empire as definitive and formative in the development
of this hybrid consciousness. He is not only critical of many theorists of nationhood and ethnicity (both Modernist and Primordialist), but also of many of the touch-stones of Scottish nationhood beloved of the diaspora and nurtured by historiography: Davidson tears away at such shibboleths as the Declaration of Arbroath, whose historic importance as an expression of Scottish polito-cultural coherence he flatly rejects. In seeking to present pre- and immediate post-Union Scotland’s national consciousness as incoherent, Davidson argues that two communities—Highland and Lowland—operated within Scottish territory, and that the progressive weakening of Highland society—and the ultimate appropriation of its symbols by a Lowland core—point to weaknesses in approaches which suggest all of Scotland formed a “periphery” to an English core and which reduce and conflate the complexities of the Highland-Lowland dynamic to an “English-Scottish” conflict. This is a welcome contribution to historiography, although in its dissection of “Tartanry” and “Balmorality”, it treads familiar, if still persuasive, ground. Davidson’s caveat is that this was not so much Nairn’s “deformed” nationalism, as much as the very substance of Scottish national consciousness which necessarily emerged under the specific political and capitalist development of union, and which was progressively diffused through the population.

Davidson’s account is an explicitly materialist (and more specifically Marxist) approach to the questions of class and nation; as such, it will no doubt attract much of the same criticism levelled at analyses which apparently reduce cognitive functions to products of specifically economic structural changes. Its originality lies in its theoretical position, not in its source base, which largely comprises secondary material; like other largely schematic efforts, this analysis of Scottish national consciousness is painted on a very large canvass. It can be faulted for its cursory treatment of many themes, and its ambitious time-span of analysis, taking in Robert the Bruce, Union and, more briefly, twentieth-century developments. Indeed, given the theoretical schema for this analysis, Davidson’s obvious focus is on the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, which he sees as critical in the birth of Scottish national consciousness. The Origins of Scottish
Nationhood should excite scholarly debate among historians, and students of politics and sociology. It offers a provocative periodisation and a valuable perspective on key themes in Scottish (and British) national development.

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