Review


When reading Graeme Morton’s new book I was reminded of Mr Gradgrind’s famous speech in praise of Utilitarianism in Dickens’ *Hard Times*: ‘NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life … stick to Facts, sir’, and on the whole Morton does. Indeed, the sheer level of information regarding the social experience of Scots in the nineteenth century can be overwhelming. Every aspect of that experience is covered from the weather, to dying, to praying, to sex, to working, to leaving and much more besides. Some of the facts are well-known, but others less so. Thus, we discover that Scotland is the wettest and cloudiest part of Britain and the west of Scotland experienced nearly eighteen more inches of rain per annum than the east in the nineteenth century. In terms of courtship ‘salt’ was favoured as aphrodisiac in north-east Scotland, and the rate of illegitimacy was twice that of England. Attendance at funerals by a minister of the Church of Scotland was not formal practice until 1897. Given the preponderant empiricism of the book one might have the impression that it is an exceedingly dry read but Morton proves himself (unexpectedly) to be a writer of some wit with a good eye for an anecdote and a good ear for a story. One of my personal favourites concerns Kirkpatrick Macmillan of Langholm, Dumfries-shire, who invented the first pedal cycle in 1839. In 1842 he pedalled 77 miles from Dumfries to Glasgow taking two days to complete the journey, which is
exactly what it would have taken to travel the journey on foot, and for his pains was fined 5s for a minor collision with a child!

While there is no doubting the volume is a treasure trove of data covering all aspects of life in nineteenth-century Scotland and beyond there is a light touch theoretical underpinning based on Michel Foucault’s theory of ‘objectification’. Morton uses this to address questions of history and identity through the interplay of self, nation and the outside world. The conflation of these concepts acts to produce a sense of ourselves and others. This is an interesting and useful approach but one that is deficient as it shows a lack of awareness of the dynamic of power. As Edward Said, in his study of Orientalism (1978), has argued power resides in the hands of those who have the right to objectify that they are imagining. With this in mind which groups have exercised that power to define Scottish identity and how have they convinced those below them to collude in their definition? Moreover, what is the role of class and gender in shaping that identity? In Morton’s hands class and gender are used as a means of social and economic measurement rather than explored as a dynamic and fluid set of social relationships. Indeed, the author if anything tends to play down the role of women both at home and abroad in shaping the British Empire, completely ignoring the part played by Mary Slessor in Calabar, Nigeria, who it could be argued was of equal importance to David Livingstone. Therefore, those looking for answers to big historical questions will not find them in this volume, which the author admits is essentially a ‘narrative history book’ (p.5).

But how good is the narrative and how much depth to it is there? While the coverage is comprehensive and the sheer variety of social experience is well illustrated, the scope remains the crucial weakness of the book. The chapters are episodic and the sections within them at times fail to connect,
ending abruptly with no sense of continuity. There are overwhelming amounts of data but on the whole the actual human experiences which the information speaks to remain discrete, hidden among the facts. One example of this might be the way that work is dealt with. Morton provides data on the composition of the labour force, the level of output, the ownership of capital, and the degree of income inequality, but nothing on the actual experience of work, the nature of skill, or the degree of conflict. Thus, the analysis appears to be rather superficial and this criticism can be applied to other areas covered in the book. One further criticism is the absence of footnotes which prevents the researcher from either checking the veracity of the presented data, or from developing further some of the more interesting parts of the volume. The bibliography is not extensive enough or annotated to make up for this deficiency.

In spite of this, the volume is sure to feature on undergraduate reading lists. The students will welcome the clarity of the language and the coherence of the structure; the profession might adopt an attitude that is more equivocal.

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