THE CATHEDRALS OF SCOTLAND

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All thirty-five of Scotland’s cathedrals and cathedral sites are attractively presented in this book. They are arranged alphabetically by the city or town where they are located, and while each entry contains enough information to stand on its own, Peter Galloway’s carefully-researched and readable prose makes The Cathedrals of Scotland a pleasure to read straight through from beginning to end. The text is supplemented by many photographs of the cathedrals, both in colour and in black and white. The thirty-five cathedrals here show considerable architectural variation, and Galloway is sensitive to each building’s uniqueness, appreciating both historical and geographical considerations in the aesthetics of a building. Thus he speaks of being “captivated by the rough and powerful beauty” of St. Magnus on Orkney, Britain’s most northerly cathedral, “the cathedral of the Viking longboats, of North Sea gales, of storms and tempests”, (135) and he finds the water stains in the Cathedral Church of St. Columba in Oban not a detraction, but rather a feature suited to “a sea front cathedral for a sea-girt diocese” (148).

Each cathedral’s entry begins with the history or legend of its origin, and its subsequent development to the present day. After this, Galloway describes the cathedral’s architectural features and weaves these in with Scottish history, demonstrating strikingly the importance of broad historical events and trends upon the fabric of specific ecclesiastical buildings. For example, he shows how the political turmoil of the 13th century affected Dunblane Cathedral when King Edward I of England ordered the roof to be stripped of lead in order to provide material for the construction of siege engines to be used against Stirling Castle, although, Galloway tells us, Edward “obligingly left a small portion of roof over each altar” (47). While he clearly appreciates
the complexity of historical change, Galloway does not withhold his opinion on periods which he sees as having been detrimental to his beloved churches. Not surprisingly, he shows no affection for the more destructive elements of the Protestant Reformation and “its vindictive hatred of the pre-reformation church and its philistine behaviour towards anything of beauty” (166). He demonstrates more sympathy towards the good intentions of the Gothic revival of the nineteenth century and even the upheavals of the comparatively secular twentieth century. Concerning the cathedral in Aberdeen, although he speaks of the “embarrassingly tiny communion table” (7), and the spire which “is clumsily cluttered with heavy ornamentation, as though the architect, restrained at lower levels, was unleashed on the spire”, (13) nevertheless Galloway is, as always, aware that his own opinions are not the only valid ones. For this clearly disliked cathedral in Aberdeen, he says,

Some observers would contemplate the interior of this cathedral today with a sense of depression. Whether, in the cause of liturgical change or, as here, seemingly on the basis of episcopal whim, the extensive and savage destruction of Victorian Gothic is inexcusable….. Others hold the opinion that in removing the clutter of Victorian Gothic, Bishop Walsh has left a cathedral with the clean architectural lines of its original design more evident and reordered in a way which makes it a joy for the celebration of the liturgy of the Second Vatican Council (15).

Galloway’s descriptions of the cathedrals and his explanations of why they evolved into the form we see today are both informative and entertaining. His stronger opinions are usually lightened in tone by his sense of humour. It is a sense of humour I hope his readers, especially those with a connection to the cathedrals, share. Galloway certainly manages to evoke strong mental images when he describes the site of Glasgow cathedral as “horribly overshadowed by the vast, ugly, infirmary to the
north and the sinister looking necropolis to the east”, (101) and when he says of St. Mary’s cathedral in Edinburgh that “the spacious and expansive interior, with its acreage of chairs, slightly suggests a large airport departure lounge, although one that is pleasantly warm and welcoming” (83).

At the end of the book is a very helpful glossary of terms and a bibliography for those who wish to read further which, after reading this book, I imagine many people will. The Cathedrals of Scotland would be enjoyed by anyone with an interest in the religious history of Scotland or an appreciation of the beauty of Scottish churches.

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