Recent seminars at the Research Centre in Scottish History at Strathclyde University have been fertile ground for producing an eclectic range of lively and interesting articles on Scottish history. Papers delivered at the 1993-94 and 1994-95 sessions were later reworked into a volume of essays entitled Scotland in the 20th Century (edited by T. M. Devine and R. J. Finlay, Edinburgh University Press, 1996, pg. 312) and now papers delivered at the 1996-97 seminar have been reworked into another collection entitled Eighteenth Century Scotland: New Perspectives.

Sixteen essays have been grouped together by a list of reputable authors, including T. C. Smout, Allan I. Macinnes, Michael Fry, T. M. Devine and J. R. Young, with Devine adding an introduction to the collection. A vast array of subjects are covered, ranging from traditional topics in the areas of politics and economics to issues of demographics, urbanization, and the environment as well as such seminal movements as Jacobitism and the Enlightenment. More interestingly, the authors give some degree of service to the idea of comparison studies, particularly Smout’s comparisons with Scandinavian countries in “The Improvers and the Scottish Environment,” pushing Scottish history into a larger European and international dimension.

As is the case with all collections of essays, particular pieces of scholarship stick out drawing a reader’s interest either by topic or argument while others fade into the background, not necessarily because of poor quality, but simply due to comparison. Jane Rendall’s “Clio, Mars and Minerva: The Scottish Enlightenment and the Writing of Women’s History” is the gem of this
collection. The author suggests "... that this was a period not of the absence of women but of the contest over their appearance in the historical record" (134). History, in the present as in the past, has the ability, the author contends, to "... convey powerfully gendered and moralizing strategies for the civil society of the future" (135). By selecting examples from eighteenth-century historiography, such as William Alexander, John Millar, and Lord Kames, Rendall discerns that there existed a conscious understanding that the status of women was unsatisfactory by law and needed to be altered in order to bring together, what contemporaries perceived as, the complementary roles of men and women for the benefit of the nation. While an excellent essay throughout, Rendall's provocative thesis could benefit from further examples and greater use of female writers as well as an attempt to gauge how readers responded to these writings, particularly female readers.

The hot topic of identity studies is not neglected in this work as two contributions, Alexander Murdoch's "Scotland and the Idea of Britain in the Eighteenth Century" and Richard J. Finlay's "Keeping the Covenant: Scottish National Identity." While Murdoch's article is more of a defense of Linda Colley's Britons: Forging a Nation, 1707-1832 (1992), which has come under considerable scrutiny since its publication, particularly by Scottish historians, Finlay's article could be a catalyst to the sub-genre of identity studies as the author laments the lack of scholarship devoted to religion as the central pillar of eighteenth-century Scottish national identity. The author attests "... that too little attention has focused on the competing claims within Scotland regarding national identity... ." (130) and too much on the notion of an emerging Britain and British identity, or the role of intellectuals and rationalism. A noteworthy idea as it applies to the eighteenth-century which will no doubt spur further research.

While it is difficult to speak of a unifying theme for any collection of essays, the idea of Union and its impact seems to be the predominant question that governs any discussion of eighteenth-century Scotland. With the exceptions of the identity essays and John R. Young's "The Parliamentary Incorporating
Union of 1707: Political Management, Anti-Unionism and Foreign Policy,” no essay exclusively focuses on the events of 1707, but through almost all, the issue seeps out. Whether it be estimating the decline of Scottish Gaeldom, the numbers of the Jacobite movement, or the impact of the Highland estate change and tenant emigration, Union with England remains a pivotal event politically, economically, and culturally to the eighteenth-century. And, while no longer widely perceived as the causal agent to widespread national developments of the period, such as economic improvement, the Union remains an imaginary bench post for Scottish historians. Eighteenth-century issues, no longer judged in a strict pre-Union/post-Union sense, will still be evaluated with a strong consideration towards the role and influence of the 1707 Union.

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