Review

Dan Embree, Edward Donald Kennedy and Kathleen Dal, eds. 
Short Scottish Prose Chronicles Translated by Susan Edgington. 

Reader’s Digest is seen as a modern phenomenon but the desire for condensed forms of literature goes back to at least the Middle Ages. The great vernacular histories of Scotland by Barbour, Wyntoun, and Hary and the Latin works of Fordun, Bower, Mair, and Boece were long and complicated. Fortunately, there were authors at hand to solve these problems by providing shorter chronicles that transmitted the basic outlines of Scottish history to their readers. Short Scottish Prose Chronicles presents edited versions of seven of these. Although some of these have been published in older editions, they tend to be in rare works and are not up to modern editing standards. The editors are to be congratulated for making accessible to researchers and students modern editions of these chronicles. The seven works include the French La Vrai Cronicque d’Escoce, the Latin Nomina Omnium Regum Scotorum, and the Scots The Scottish Originale, The Chronicle of the Scots, The Ynglis Chronicle, The Brevis Chronica, and the fragmentary St Andrews Chronicle, the latter of which appears in published form for the first time. The book will be of great use to those interested in both medieval history and historiography.

An excellent and detailed introduction sets the chronicles in their context by first giving a summary of Scottish historiography up to the mid-sixteenth century. The editors argue that most of these short chronicles were written in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. It is well-known that there were many abbreviations of Scotichronicon, the most famous being the Book of Pluscarden, but it was not only Bower who was being condensed and, to a greater or lesser extent, recast by their abbreviators. The editors point out that this period was one in which the relationship with England was of serious concern, and all of the works reflect this in one way or another. Some take on a much more critical attitude to the English than the works on which they are based,
highlighting for example the “fact” that the English kings were descended from the devil.

The introduction provides a detailed analysis of each work, including examining the manuscripts in which they appear, the sources on which they are or could be based, possible dates and in some cases authorship (all of them are anonymous), the purposes behind their composition, and the intended readership. For example, it is suggested that *La Vrai Cronicque* may have been intended as briefing notes on Scottish history for ambassadors involved in negotiating an Anglo-French treaty in 1460, a treaty that had the potential to ignore the French alliance with Scotland. Many of the chronicles seem to have functioned almost as teaching tools, providing short and easily digestible outlines of what their authors saw as the essential outline of Scottish history. The editors provide an analysis of the content of each chronicle, with the differences in tone and material from their sources discussed. In general, the short chronicles tend to focus more on English treachery and less on Scottish flaws than do the longer histories, although there are exceptions. The editors suggest that *The Chronicle of the Scots* and *The St Andrews Chronicle* were less politically motivated than the other five, although they were still concerned with issues of Scottish independence.

One theme central to all the chronicles is the importance of the unbroken line of the Scottish monarchy and its significance for Scotland’s complete independence from England. This takes most of them into the realm of legendary history and the various versions of Scottish origin stories, some of which will be familiar to readers from the arguments put forward to counter Edward I’s claims to superiority over Scotland and from the Declaration of Arbroath. The importance of kingship is highlighted most clearly in *Nomina Omnium Regum Scotorum*, a genealogy of Scottish kings in prose. King-lists were of some antiquity in Scotland, but such royal genealogies were also very current in contemporary England and Europe, and the Scots were participating in this trend. Hector Boece helped in this endeavour by thoughtfully supplying the names of the forty kings who had remained nameless in earlier histories and *The St Andrews Chronicle* summarised this material for readers. Taken together, these seven chronicles provide new insight into
how at least some Scots saw their history and their nation in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

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