Review


The timely publication in paperback of Andrew Blaikie’s engaging work is a sophisticated and nuanced contribution to the debate over an elusive Scottish consciousness. Blaikie argues that the Scottish identity’s “fugitive traces of belonging” has not bore consistent scrutiny because individual and collective sides of identity have ambiguously shaped one another through non-linguistic modes of communication. His exploration of the modern memory finds that “any reference to the past consists of an admixture of intensely intimate recollections filtered through the shared language of a collectively organized imaginary.” (pp. 240-42) Blaikie persuasively identifies those “traces of belonging” expressed in the Enlightenment to the Kailyard (cabbage patch) writers of the late 1800s. Also connected is John Grierson’s “The Face of Scotland,” the poet Hugh MacDiarmid, and Dundee-based publisher D. C. Thomson.

Much of this book portrays how a shared framework of reference links the individual and the community to each other and the modern “social imaginary.” In doing so, he challenges the notion that tradition defines a community while modernity defines society; instead, he argues that the transmission of ideas across generations forms the Scottish community and society. Blaikie claims that a peculiarly Scottish tradition of moral civility imbues that communality, which finds expression in common democratic values, whose roots he suggests may pre-date the Enlightenment. His most persuasive suggestion is the co-existence of the “parish paradigm” and a wider national consciousness; here he resurrects locality within Scottish culture (particularly ‘from below’) challenging any idea that it is parochial and narrow-minded. Instead he argues that Scotland’s social values coalesced within a parochial framework to form the modern national identity. The “parish paradigm” serves as a microcosm for nation and the prism for reflexive identification (p. 100). Here, the local community, be it
physical or a network, connects to the nation’s social imaginary in a shared cultural intimacy. That common frame of reference includes symbols of Scottish national kitsch, such as tartanry, which provides identity through its ubiquity (if not its peculiarity).

This is a powerful book, not least because its exploration of the “Scots imaginary” predicates each individual’s response to his or her community. It will resonate with anyone who holds an attachment to their land or their communities. Blaikie re-imagines Scottishness as “many Scotlands.” (p. 240) There Blaikie convincingly argues that “no one tradition, or unified morality, or singular conception of nationhood” dominates that identity. (p. 232) Instead, a plurality of cultural memories exists, this “universe of meanings co-habiting under the canopy of the Scots imaginary that describes the field in which each of us might relate to the place.” (p. 240) That collective imagination forms a frame of reference to which Scots might relate through a “shared lens of nationhood.” (p. 247)

Two aspects are absent from this book. First, there is little discussion of the legacy of Scotland’s religious past beyond the influence of Presbyterianism on John Grierson’s philosophical idealism and on MacDiarmid’s Calvinist elitism of the elect. This is surprising in a book that demonstrates the power of the “parish paradigm” in the development of nationhood; Blaikie’s research background in the parish registers of north-east Scotland makes this especially puzzling. This diffidence might be rooted in a wariness of the Presbyterian kirk’s detrimental image in Scottish culture. There is little discussion of the historical influences of Presbyterianism on national consciousness, an important aspect if Blaikie can rightly claim the past’s legacy in contemporary frameworks of reference.

Second, and more contentiously, there is no mention of unionism; there is no index entry for it, let alone any engagement with the influence that the Union or England may have had on shaping Scottish consciousness, other than defining it in opposition to the English. Whilst he is right to expose the bigotry within Scottishness that in some quarters excludes non-natives, he does not address the unionism explored, for instance, in Colin Kidd’s Union and Unionisms: Political Thought in Scotland 1500-2000.
This unionism is as inextricably part of Scotland’s past as its Calvinist legacy. If as Blaikie so convincingly claims, “the past” is “simultaneously both part of what we are and where we are not,” a fuller past needs recognition. (p. 241) Blaikie’s brilliant identification of the fragmented nature of the “universe of meanings” underlying the Scottish imagination, however, leaves us with the hope of “many Scotlands.”

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