REVIEWS

MEDIEVAL SCOTLAND,
THE MAKING OF AN IDENTITY

Bruce Webster, British History in Perspective

THE PAPACY, SCOTLAND AND
NORTHERN ENGLAND, 1342-1378

A. D. M. Barrell, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life
and Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

CHANGING VALUES IN MEDIEVAL
SCOTLAND. A STUDY OF PRICES,
MONEY, WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

Elizabeth Gemmill and Nicholas Mayhew, (Cambridge:

The academic study of medieval Scotland in
all its variety is flourishing as these three
new works all demonstrate. Bruce Webster’s
Medieval Scotland will probably be of most interest to a
non-specialist audience, but the other two books under review both have important contributions to make to the field. It is heartening too to see that all three works have been published by English presses, suggesting that interest in medieval Scotland has been recognised to go beyond the borders of the realm itself.

Webster’s *Medieval Scotland*, part of the Macmillan series British History in Perspective, is not a history of the medieval realm as such, but rather, as his subtitle explains, an examination of “the making of an identity”. With the current resurgence of Scottish national feeling, this is a timely book, even though not all modern nationalists may want to agree with his conclusion that Scottish identity “does not depend on political independence or self-government” (p.136). The introduction to this volume was written shortly before the 1997 election brought the promise of Scottish devolution; recent events may have changed the author’s impression that “modern Scots have shown no overwhelming enthusiasm for formal self-government” (p.1).

What constitutes Scottish identity? Webster argues that it is not geography, culture or language, but rather a combination of factors which have come together over the centuries, especially in the period since about 1050. As he points out, Scotland is an amalgam of disparate regions and peoples, so different in geography, economy and cultural contacts, that it is something of a wonder that a nation ever resulted at all. Webster divides Scotland into five different regions each with their own histories and economies. That they did
coalesce is largely due to external threats, first from the Vikings, and secondly from the English.

Scandinavian influence looms large in the discussion of the formation of identity before 1050. Webster argues that it was the Viking threat which helped unite the Picts and the Scots under the rule of Kenneth MacAlpin in the 840s. He does not delve deeply into the debate over the nature of this union, although he does suggest that Pictish identity may not have been as completely suppressed as is sometimes suggested. Scandinavian attacks and settlement also had the result of cutting off the Scottish church from developments in England, and leaving it to develop its own particular character. From the sixth century onwards, Christianity was a great unifier of the diverse peoples who inhabited Scotland. Webster sees the church as coming together with the secular power in the ninth century in response to the attacks by the pagan Vikings, to the benefit of both church and monarchy. This unity was symbolised by St Andrews which, Webster argues, became both the political and spiritual centre of the new kingdom of Alba.

The independence of the church is an important aspect in the making of Scottish identity. Webster argues that the church was the first to really assert a national identity, as it struggled for freedom from the claims of Canterbury and York, especially after the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. This development is traced in detail in chapter 3, "The Identity of Faith". With the pope’s recognition of its independence of English control in 1192, granting it the status of
“special daughter of the papacy”, the church was free to serve the interests of the emerging national monarchy, without any concerns about the possibly conflicting interests of English ecclesiastical overlords. The role of the church in the creation of a Scottish identity continued to be central throughout the Middle Ages, from ecclesiastical involvement in arguments for Scottish independence during the Wars of Independence, to the creation of a “national breviary” by Bishop Elphinstone in the late fifteenth century to replace English usage.

The monarchy was also an important focus for Scottish identity, although as Webster points out, unlike England this did not result in strongly-centralised government. Despite the beginnings of some centralisation of government institutions in the fifteenth century, Scottish kings were most effective when they maintained a balance of power between the centre and the localities. “Scotland saw much less than England of the blending of local communities and royal centralisation”. (32) Justice remained largely local until and even beyond the end of the Middle Ages. This lack of centralisation has sometimes been seen as a mark of weakness in the Scottish monarchy, but Webster makes a convincing argument for its overall effectiveness. Bringing together the many disparate regions and peoples which made up the new nation required respect for their differences.

The second major external force which helped form Scottish identity was the claim of the English kings to overlordship of the northern realm. Such claims had been made from the days when the Wessex kings first
unified England under their control in the tenth century, but were put forward with greater force after the Norman conquest. Webster traces the history of these claims, leading up to the major attempt to enforce them by Edward I and Edward III in the Wars of Independence. In devoting an entire chapter to the Wars, Webster echoes the general consensus among most Scottish historians that the Wars were the crucible in which a Scottish national identity was firmly established once and for all. As he points out, it was the need to answer English claims to suzerainty that resulted in the production of a national mythical history, shaped to demonstrate Scotland’s long-standing status as an independent nation. The two centuries of intermittent warfare with England which followed Edward I’s initial invasion in 1296, also ensured that anti-English feeling would become an important part of Scottish national identity, and one which endured beyond the Middle Ages.

One of the strengths of this book is that while its focus is on Scottish identity, the author is always careful to place this identity in a European context. This is best illustrated in chapter 6 “Scotland and Christendom”. As Webster points out, the isolation of Scotland can be over-emphasized; historians are not the only ones responsible, for contemporary Scots were quite capable of stressing their isolation “‘in this poor little Scotland, beyond which there is no dwelling-place at all’” (p.113) when it suited their political purposes. In fact, European contacts shaped Scottish culture and identity from the arrival of the first prehistoric peoples. Scottish
rulers, from at least the time of MacBeth onwards, saw themselves as members of a European monarchy; the Stewart kings were especially assiduous in asserting their place in Europe, through marriages, alliances and patronage of the arts. English and European influence helped shape Scottish art, architecture, education, monasticism, and trade. Recent work has shown how quickly Scottish writers, artists, and rulers adopted the new trends associated with the Renaissance; Webster demonstrates how this was possible without the loss of a distinctive Scottish identity.

The author gives good reasons for ending this study in 1513, apart from a brief epilogue, but the reader is left with whetted appetite to know what happens in the rest of the sixteenth century. It is hoped that Macmillan will commission another volume on Scotland to fill the gap in the series between 1513 and 1603 when Keith Brown's *Kingdom or Province? Scotland and the Regal Union, 1603-1715* begins. Webster refers several times to the major impact of the Reformation in shaping Scottish identity; it is to be hoped that any new study will follow his example in giving identity a similarly multi-faceted definition.

In his discussion of the pre-twelfth century Scottish church, Webster makes the point that in many ways it was similar to the church in northern England, in being cut off for long periods from developments in the Anglo-Saxon church to the south. The comparison of the Scottish and Northern English church, although at a later period, is the basis of Andrew Barrell's study,
The Papacy, Scotland and Northern England, 1342-1378, a volume in the series Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought. While Webster's book is aimed more at the general reader, this is a book which is mainly intended for specialists in the Middle Ages, especially for those interested in the workings of the medieval papacy. It is very detailed and assumes some knowledge of the structure of the medieval church. For those whose work involves research in medieval Scottish church records, it should prove very useful in explaining the origins and purposes of papal documents. It also contains some useful warnings about the surviving printed records. For example, Barrell points out that the later volumes of the printed Calendar of Papal Letters give a misleading impression of the number of papal provisions, as they miss the majority of them.

Barrell has made effective use of the rich collection of Vatican Archives material relating to Scotland which has been assembled over the years by the Scottish History Department at the University of Glasgow with the aid of the Ross Fund. The episcopal registers which form such a rich source for English church history, and which the author uses for his study of the archdiocese of York, do not survive in Scotland, but the Vatican material helps to some extent to make up for this loss.

The author is interested in how the increasing centralisation and bureaucratization of the papacy under the Avignon popes affected the actual workings of the church outside the papal court. Scotland is a particularly interesting case, because of the direct relationship with
the papacy established in 1192. The archdiocese of York was in a different position politically, being part of the English church, but the author argues that in its size and number of parishes it provides a useful comparison with the Scottish church. The impact of the Avignon papacy is assessed through an examination of papal taxation and its collection, provisions to benefices and ecclesiastical office, the issuing of licences, dispensations and favours, the relationship between the pope and the bishops and regular clergy, and the judicial aspects of the papal court. There is also a chapter examining opposition to the papacy.

Perhaps of most interest to the readers of this journal are the differences identified by Barrell between the English and Scottish churches. He is careful to point out that some apparent differences may be due to the different survival of records, but others seem to reflect political and cultural differences between the two countries, several of which are discussed by Webster. For example, in England the collectors of papal taxes were all foreigners, while in Scotland they were mostly local men. Barrell suggests that this may be due to the more centralised power of the English monarch and papal fears of the influence which he could exercise over his own subjects, whereas the decentralised nature of Scottish government meant that individual churchmen had more power in their localities.

The division of the western church into individual collectorates also reflected political realities. Until the 1340s Scotland had been part of a British Isles
collectorate, but in 1345 it became a separate unit, underlining its separate identity from the English church. As Barrell points out, it was unlikely that the Scottish church which had been so actively involved in the Wars of Independence would continue to accept the authority of a collector based in London.

Opposition to papal taxation and other aspects of papal control seems to have been greater in England than in Scotland. In England such opposition centred on Parliament which had less need of papal support than did the monarch. However, Barrell makes a good argument for re-assessing the impact of some of the anti-papal legislation, arguing that some of it was very little used in practice.

In Scotland, there may have been fewer papal provisions, resulting in less resentment of papal interference, although the fifteenth-century increase in provisions resulted in legislation similar to that of England. In one case, papal provision worked in favour of the Scottish church in its relations to England. The one area of Scotland which was not included in the “special daughter” provision of 1192 was Galloway. Barrell traces the relations of Galloway and York which continued until 1359. Papal provision to the see of Whithorn ended the relationship, with the new bishop no longer having to profess to York.

Different patterns of papal dispensations can also be identified. In England, dispensations for illegitimate birth in order to allow a man to enter holy orders were more common than marriage dispensations, while in
Scotland marriage dispensations were more numerous. This may reflect the larger population of England which made available more prospective marriage partners outside the degrees of kinship forbidden to marry by canon law. One of the main reasons put forward in Scotland for requesting marriage dispensations was to allow a marriage to take place to end a feud. Unfortunately, we do not know how successful such marriages were. Barrell also suggests that Scotland had a more lax attitude to ordination, resulting in fewer petitions to dispense with illegitimacy. Such evidence raises interesting questions about differences in marriage and sexual relations between the two countries.

Comparisons between Scotland and England are also made by Elizabeth Gemmill and Nicholas Mayhew in Changing Values in Medieval Scotland. Again this is a book for the specialist rather than the general reader; however, the conclusions reached are of great importance for those interested in the fortunes of medieval Scotland. The book should be a basic reference work for all medieval Scottish historians, as it has ramifications far beyond the economic history of the realm.

Gemmill and Mayhew have assembled almost 6000 prices from the mid-thirteenth to the mid-sixteenth centuries. Although, as the authors point out, this cannot compare with the huge amount of price data available for England for the same period, it does allow them to examine some common ideas about the Scottish medieval economy. In chapter 5, which forms over half of the book, the prices of 24 commodities are examined
in an attempt to discern economic trends. The material presented here in both the discussion and the tables will be of use to anyone doing research on the social and economic history of medieval Scotland.

Three other chapters examine price trends in Scotland, weights and measures, and currency. A further chapter provides an interesting case study, using the best preserved run of records for this period, the council records of the town of Aberdeen which survive almost without break from 1398. Since setting the official price of many of the goods sold in the town market was one of the council’s responsibilities, these records provide an excellent look at long-term price trends in one of the largest Scottish towns, and show how medieval governments dealt with economic change.

As a whole, this study supports some older ideas, and questions other ones. In Scotland, cereal grains were relatively more expensive than in England, while livestock were cheaper, reflecting the contrast between Scotland’s more pastoral economy and England’s more arable one. This price differential seems to have increased in the fifteenth century. The later fourteenth century also began a period of devaluation for Scottish money, which until then had been on par with sterling. This has been taken as a sign of the weakness of the Scottish economy, but the authors point out that devaluation was common in many European countries in this period, and that it is perhaps England which is the exception rather than Scotland.
Probably the most important new insight gained from this study is the state of the Scottish economy in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, discussed in detail in chapter 6. The most striking economic data for this period is the sharply-decreasing volume of exports. This has been assumed to indicate a trade deficit and a declining economy. However, historians have noted the great boom in building and other indicators of a healthy economy at the same period. By re-examining the evidence, along with the new evidence provided by prices, Gemmill and Mayhew make a persuasive argument that the late medieval Scottish domestic economy was not as weak as it is commonly portrayed and shed new light on the period of “the Scottish renaissance”. All three books should dispel any lingering picture of medieval Scotland as a country of “the dark ages.”

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