**REVIEW**


In recent years, and in particular since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1997, there has been an increased volume of literature considering and revising the traditional view of the role, function and power of the Scottish Parliament in the period prior to the Union of 1707. Gillian MacIntosh’s monograph covering the Restoration parliaments under Charles II enhances academic understanding of a tricky and often-ignored period which is in sharp contrast to the preceding Covenanter and Cromwellian regimes as well as a pre-cursor to the union debates in the 1690s and 1700s. Based on a wealth of previously under-exploited primary sources, and drawing on a detailed understanding of the mechanisms and personalities that made the parliament work, the author weaves an expert path through what can often be seen as dry material to present a well-considered analysis of just how the Scottish parliament operated its system of checks and balances on an absentee (and largely disinterested) monarch and an over-mighty executive, as represented by a series of King’s Commissioners.

The book is chronological for the most part, dealing with the commissions and administrations of Middleton, Lauderdale and Albany (always referred to under his English title of Duke of York), with the exception of the last chapter which seeks to place the functioning of the Scottish parliament of the period in its wider European context. This makes for a clear and easily followed journey for the reader, although the final chapter could have easily stood alone as an independent article.

The first two chapters neatly encapsulate the uncertainty that followed in the wake of the collapse of the Cromwellian republic. Frequently overtaken by events outwith Scotland, the parliament finds itself negotiating its way out of constitutional limbo and being re-established more ‘by default than design’.
Under the direction of John, Earl of Middleton, the rapid re-granting of royal prerogatives and the answering of ‘fundamental questions regarding the respective powers of crown and parliament’ are swiftly dealt with, with a minimum of opposition. Only the settlement of the religious question is prevaricated over and ultimately this too is settled in the crown’s favour. Throughout the opening chapters, the author skilfully compares the parliamentary reversion to pre-1640 business practices with similar activities undertaken in England and Ireland, giving an overall impression that a tired Scotland was yearning for a return to normality and stability. It is an impressive introduction to the book, handled in an adept and accomplished fashion.

The middle four chapters of the book address the rise, rule and opposition to ‘King Lauderdale’, John Maitland, Earl (later Duke) of Lauderdale. The treatment of Lauderdale, and the conventions or parliaments he presided over, is precise, detailed and thorough. His practice of parliamentary management (‘divide and rule’ bolstered by corruption and bribery) is brilliantly woven throughout the section. The idea that Lauderdale had ‘contempt for the institution of parliament’, exemplified by his masterful time management to stifle debate and his adjournment, dissolving and purging of parliaments to meet his or the Crown’s needs, is drummed home repeatedly. MacIntosh presents a picture of a man who acts out of arrogance, paranoia, spite, jealousy and greed, climaxing in his display of ‘an almost megalomaniacal attitude’.

This treatment does not result in a complex picture of the man’s character. While Lauderdale’s loyalty to the King (and the King’s ‘implicit trust’ in Lauderdale) is often considered, the nuance and positive qualities of the man are missing from these chapters and, as a result, the study is slightly poorer for it. Changes in characters external to the story are also too frequently dealt with in passing, rather than meriting the depth of discussion they require. Equally, although external affairs impacting on Scotland’s parliament and Lauderdale’s policy (such as the second Anglo-Dutch War and, later, the Treaty of Dover) are mentioned, they are not given enough space to breathe and, as a result, the reader requires to reference a lot more secondary material than is strictly necessary. MacIntosh’s analysis of the role of parliament is so accomplished that, as a reader, you wish for more scrutiny and more analysis of the challenges and contradictions of the one-head/two-bodies state model. Throughout the book, the author always provides cause and effect for the policies described,
but it would have been helpful to have more consideration and more in-depth analysis of the impact not just on the parliament but also on the parliamentarians and the wider Scottish state.

Like modern-day politicians, it seems that Restoration figures had little difficulty in presenting identical methods of parliamentary management and control as something new, inclusive and conciliatory. The author’s penultimate chapter deals with the fall of Lauderdale, the re-emergence of a credible Catholic threat (in the person of James, Duke of Albany and York, the new King’s Commissioner) and the aspects of continuity and change that present themselves through the new administration. Unsurprisingly, given the deference to the authority figure in control, there was relatively little opposition to anything, exacerbated by continued limits placed on debate, control by committees and imprisonment of opposition. Although there was relatively little parliamentary activity to discuss, MacIntosh considers that James did not provide sufficiently strong leadership to the institution and, as a result, although parliament was efficient, it did not meet its full potential. It also helped demonstrate some of the weaknesses that would come home to roost when James himself assumed the throne as James VII and II four years later.

In conclusion, The Scottish Parliament under Charles II, 1660-1685 is a highly recommended book: clear, precise and thoroughly researched. Throughout you are left in no doubt as to the fore-echoes of events to come. In the short term, names from the Union debates begin to identify themselves; in the longer term, concepts such as ‘party’ and ‘organised opposition’ leave the reader in no doubt that the pre-Union Scottish parliament was an administration of the modern age. Although, ultimately, the reader is left wanting more, this is no bad thing as the book will contribute a heightened vigour to the discussions and debates surrounding this complex reign and the institutions that characterised its operation and the assumptions too long in place concerning it.

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