
John Donald Ltd. has produced a remarkable flood of books on eighteenth century Scottish government and politics in recent years: Ann Whetstone on county government; Alexander Murdoch and John Shaw on politics and the arts of management; John Robertson on the militia issue; and now Ronald Sunter on patronage. Is there really room for yet another book in the field, so soon after the others? Reading Dr. Sunter's book makes it clear that there is. His study overlaps in some respects with its predecessors, but it complements them well. Here we have for the first time a detailed analysis of the essential lubricant of the eighteenth century political system in Scotland. The currency of political management was essentially the judicious exercise of patronage, and what that meant in general terms is well known, but here we have fully set out the vast ramifications and subtle nuances of the patronage system, the extraordinary range of offices and favours which were comprehended in the term. What had the man rowing a customs officer out to a ship in common with the president of the court of session; or a humble government clerk with a commander of armies? All owed their positions to patronage — though ability also contributed to some appointments, especially to high office.

Dr Sunter is mainly concerned not with great offices but with minor jobs and favours in the gift of government or private individuals which were distributed through managers of political interests, and with the voters in parliamentary elections who either benefited directly from patronage or used it to enhance their local standing by helping friends and relatives and demonstrating their access to the goodies of the cornucopia of patronage. The object of the exercise was primarily to influence the results of parliamentary elections, but Dr Sunter argues that the system was not simply one of crude corruption and bribery. It was more subtle that that, and most country gentlemen if offered a direct bribe to influence their vote would have been highly offended at so dishonourable an idea, Rather a favour bestowed was seen as an act of friendship, and such friendship (backed up by social contact and a display of respect) created obligations which would predispose the voter to respond through the way he cast his vote. But though this was the case in the counties, the burghs were a very different matter. Gentlemen who wished to enter parliament would openly offer, and the merchant and craftsmen councillors would openly accept, bribes. Those doing the bribing doubtless assumed that their own honour remained unsullied, and felt contempt for those receiving the bribes: they were not acting as gentlemen. The reaction of this reader, at least, is not that the gentry have been proved to be men of honour, but rather that they were accomplished hypocrites: the cheerful corruptibility of the burgh voters is almost refreshing by comparison. They admitted to themselves the nature of the dirty game they were involved in, while the gentry wrapped up their own venality in a cloak of gentility. Doubtless they were sincere in their confidence in their own honour, but they were careful not to think through the implications of their acceptance of patronage favours.

In all, a most stimulating and welcome book, and one which provokes much comparison with other political systems. The eighteenth century may have been the classical age of patronage, but is government possible without some element of patronage and clientage?
There are enough beams in our eyes on both sides of the Atlantic to make us wary of condemning too complacently the motes in those of eighteenth century Scotland.

David Stevenson
University of Aberdeen

NOTE

Queen of Scots Soup: An Eighteenth-Century Scottish recipe

A recipe for Queen of Scots soup can be found in the memoirs of an eighteenth-century Scottish servant John Macdonald. Macdonald prepared the soup himself, to the great satisfaction, he claimed, of several masters. His memoirs were printed in 1927 and it is from them that this recipe is taken.

'The Queen of Scots soup is made in manner following. Six chickens are cut in small pieces, with the heart, gizzard and liver well washed, and then put into a stew-pan and just covered with water and boiled till the chickens are enough. Season it with salt and cayenne pepper, and mince parsley with eight egg yolks and whites beat together. Stir round all together'


Jeremy Black
University of Durham