
When this book first appeared in 1968, it was rightly seen as a very important contribution to understanding Scotland’s recent past. Both by adopting the approach of analysing key institutions in contemporary Scotland (education, the church, the economy, the legal, political and social systems), and by putting them in their recent historical context, Dr. Kellas was able to demonstrate the existence of a specifically Scottish identity which still operated and influenced the present situation. At the same time, the gap which had hitherto existed in the historiography of Scotland—the virtual termination of nearly all previous works around the middle of the 19th century—was plugged with a deft and concise historical outline of the last hundred years. A further benefit of the book was its careful avoidance of partisanship, as Dr. Kellas struck a judicious balance in placing the continuing elements of a Scottish identity within the perspective of a widespread set of values and characteristics shared with the rest of Britain.

For this new edition, the contemporary sections have been brought up to date, but the historical portions have been left untouched. Some repetitions still remain, and it is a pity that these were not eliminated during revision. A new chapter has been added on “Culture in Scotland since 1870”, by I.D. Lloyd-Jones. This is not totally successful: it is a breathless omnibus catalogue that does not manage to bring out that sense of the past impinging on the present which Dr. Kellas achieves so well elsewhere, and it is particularly weak in dealing with the literary revival of the last twenty years.

After a decade, the strengths of the book, as outlined above, still remain, but certain blind-spots are also apparent. Dr. Kellas seems to do less justice to the industrial West of Scotland—which has been the preponderant region in every respect since 1870—than to peripheral areas like the Highlands. Thus, the 12-page chapter on the economy has four pages devoted to the Highlands; Highland politics in the 1880’s are given roughly the same amount of space as Clydeside political during and after the First World War. A further problem is that the chronological treatment is uneven. In almost all the chapters there is a greater concentration on the pre-1914 and post-1945 eras than on the inter-war decades. In some cases, e.g., education, this is appropriate, but it does make for imbalance in dealing with political and social developments. It is a trifle strange to find the crofter’s war of the late nineteenth century getting as much coverage in an account of the rise of the Labour party as is given to the causes of the party’s dramatic electoral triumph in the 1920’s and its dominance since, which arguably have a close connection with economic and social trends of the time. This past point relates to another area which Dr. Kellas deals with rather sketchily. His analysis of the social structure hardly penetrates beyond a collection of statistics about occupational distribution and house-ownership. He has little to say, for instance, about the existence of a distinctive working-class community and identity in the industrial Lowlands, or of the pattern of relations between classes, two topics which some would contend are relevant to interpreting the social and political context of modern Scotland. All of these points merge together in the feeling that perhaps Dr. Kellas is inclined to overemphasize the significance of religious sectarianism, to which he reverts constantly in discussing the west-central area. Now it is true that this has been a factor of considerable relevance in explaining the political and social history of that part of Scotland, but it is too sweeping to make it the major influence (as Dr. Kellas seems to), and at any rate alternative causes, such as those suggested above, might have been considered.
Nevertheless, this is a vital book for students of modern Scotland, particularly for its basically sympathetic approach, tempered by a readiness to be critical where necessary—a balance brought out most clearly in the chapter on education. Its re-issue is very welcome.

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