Scotland's Progress: The Survival of a Nation
by J. M. Reid


The "progress" which is the theme of the late Mr Reid's book is not towards things bigger, better and brighter but of the sort that characterizes a dramatic tragedy. In the view of the author the tragedy is the loss of Scotland's political autonomy, possibly even of the nationhood which, so he not unreasonably claims, Scotland was first of European lands to achieve. A series of historical sketches demonstrates the formation of the Scottish nation, its successful struggle for survival in the wars of independence, its modification by the Reformation, its aspirations to fulfil a divine mission in the days of the Covenants, its doom-laden path towards the parliamentary union of 1707. In the last third of the book the debilitating consequences of union are analysed against the background of the industrial revolution, the Highland clearances, the disruption of the kirk, the two world wars and the intervening slump. As might be expected of a former editor of the GLASGOW BULLETIN Mr Reid writes in lively and lucid fashion. If his chapter titles are reminiscent of newspaper headlines some are apt; but "The Antidote to English," an adaptation of a remark made by Pope Martin V in a very different context, is a strange heading for a sketch of Scotland between 400 and 685.

In "covering" the years between 43 A.D. and 1970 the author shows considerable skill. As a result his work is something more than the usual popular short history of Scotland, but also something less: scope for shrewd and thoughtful analysis is purchased at the price of omitting those factual details that the professional historians normally feel obliged to purvey. For those who are well acquainted with the "facts" the allusive approach will present no difficulties. The less recondite may sometimes be left in an uninformed bewilderment from which they are unlikely to be rescued by the twenty-two pages of "Short Chronology" given as an appendix. These wearisome pages of dates may give assurance that the author has done his homework - there is, I think, only one indisputable mistake, where he ends the "Babylonish Captivity" of the papacy in 1367 instead of 1377 - but the dates, or at least the significant ones, might more usefully and digestibly have been interspersed throughout the text.

While the text itself contains interpretations that may be disputed there are remarkably few that call for outright condemnation. One of these is the description of David 11 as a "vainglorious fool" and the assertion that "when he died he left Scotland almost bankrupt." Nor can John Knox "reasonably be accused of murder" without a careful presentation of reasons.
Moreover it is strange that in dealing with the years between 1424 and 1513 - the only lengthy period in which Scotland made its mark as a really autonomous nation - Mr Reid presents all too brief and gloomy a picture. Left largely untouched is the question of the extent to which Scots after 1707 came to regard themselves realistically as British - particularly in the days of imperial expansion - while retaining only a sentimental affection for their distinctive past. And if the author cannot be accused of rosy optimism in estimating the current strength of Scottish nationalism he may perhaps be guilty of minimising the feelings of "Britishness" that still exist. One curious omission is a study of the implications of expected British (and Irish) entry into the European Common Market. This impending event may well allow Scotland to make the "genuinely fresh start in the world" that the author advocates in his closing lines. Despite such criticisms this work may be warmly recommended to all those who are interested in the past and future of Scotland.

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