Frederick J. Pohl, *Prince Henry Sinclair, His Expedition to the New World in 1398*  

There have been a number of different groups and nationalities who, over the past three or four centuries, have claimed the credit for discovering the North American Continent. On the basis of Christopher Columbus's voyage of 1492 the Italians and Spaniards have both sought the honor. More recently the Portuguese and the French have entered the arena claiming their fishermen had reached Newfoundland and Nova Scotia long before Columbus made his landfall in the Caribbean. Now there is a new claimant in the person of Frederick Pohl who asserts that Henry Sinclair, Earl of Orkney, a Scot, made the trip in 1398, as one of the first Europeans to land in America.

The reviewer must admit that when he commenced reading the book, he had some very serious doubts about the whole matter. It seemed like one of these perennially appearing fictional accounts which are produced on occasion to stir up historians and nationalists. As he read on, however, he came to the conclusion that the author had a good deal on his side in terms of information. Basing his proof on evidence supplied by the letters of two Venetians, Nicolo Zeno and his nephew Antonio, who claimed to have sailed across the Atlantic with Sinclair, and corroborating those statements from other sources, it looks very much as though Pohl has succeeded in
proving his contention that Henry Sinclair did indeed make it to what is now Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and New England.

The first part of the book is taken up with a description of Sinclair's boyhood and life as a young man at his home in Roslin, south of Edinburgh. He then traces his activity as Earl of Orkney, including the struggle he had to obtain the title which was contested by one of his relatives. He also gives a somewhat romantic picture of Henry's courtship and marriage to Janet, daughter of Halyburton of Dirleton. In fact one becomes a little surfeited with "our hero" and similar expressions of 19th century romanticism. This tendency, however, should not obscure the fact that the author does carry on the story with considerable evidence to back him up. He presents a very credible account of Sinclair's building of the castle at Kirkwall, the development of a fleet and his relations with the King of Norway who was his overlord, as the Orkney Islands were part of the Norwegian domain.

The second section of the book begins with the account of Sinclair's taking over of the Shetland Islands, at which time he rescued from both the sea and the islanders Nicolo Zeno of Venice, who was also an experienced sailor. The outcome was voyages to Greenland, and although Nicolo died not long afterwards, his nephew stayed with Sinclair, while continuing to send accounts back home of the various expeditions. At this point the earl came in contact with a fisherman who reported that he had visited a "new world" to the west, a tale highly improbable but apparently circumstantial enough to give the earl a desire to investigate.

The outcome of this decision is set forth in part three, which describes from various sources both literary, traditional and archeological, Sinclair's visit to what appears to have been present day Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and New England. It would seem that he spent the winter in Nova Scotia although he had sent Antonio Zeno and a considerable part of his expedition back to Scotland before the bad weather set in. The following spring he returned and shortly afterwards was killed in a fight defending his earldom against the attacks of the forces of Henry IV of England.

This is a very interesting work, and despite its early romanticism which at times seems to be overdone, it presents a very plausible thesis. Moreover, the author backs his story up well with various types of evidence, much of which is too detailed to set forth
in a short review. Those who are interested in such Scottish adventures, however, will find it well worth their time to read the book carefully.

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The president of the Canadian National Railways returned to his birthplace in a chauffeured Rolls-Royce, with a crate containing twelve bottles of champagne. He ordered the driver to stop at the Meldrum House, Old Meldrum’s finest hotel, into which he boldly strode. To the startled crowd, he announced: ‘I’m Donald Gordon, and I’ve done well. Will you come and join me in a drink?’ Those who shared the drinks surely agreed that Gordon had done well; those who read this biography will not. This authorized biography is not a book that Donald Gordon deserved.

Gordon had a most distinguished career in the Canadian public service. An immigrant to Canada, he had little educational advantage and he knew poverty well. Beginning as a bank clerk, Gordon had become the deputy governor of the Bank of Canada by the age of thirty-seven. During World War II, he served as the chairman of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board. In this position, his enormous talents as a publicist and his strong personality which commanded loyalty and fear served him extremely well. Canada’s record in price control was the best among the allies, and Gordon merits much of the credit. After the war, Gordon took on the presidency of the financially-troubled Canadian National Railways. He brought efficiency and economy to the railways which had been plagued for years by political interference and administrative ineptitude. His final position was the chairmanship of Brinco where he arranged the financing for the massive Churchill Falls hydro-electric development. A record and evaluation of this career would have been a valuable contribution to Canadian history.

Gordon’s biographer fails because he seeks to make this book
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easy reading. The Great Scot repeats endless anecdotes, some of which are almost surely apocryphal. Gordon's public life takes second place to accounts of his raucous private life. Gordon's drinking bouts, his tragic family life, and his mercurial temperament pervade this book, but they are fundamentally uninteresting. These things certainly should find a place in a Gordon biography, but they should never be permitted to dominate. Gordon's significance lies in his public life. The detail lavished on his private life illuminates nothing; indeed, it confuses the reader, leaving him to wonder how this drunk and wife-abuser could ever have held the positions he did. What he accomplished in those positions is not described well. Schull has relied almost exclusively upon the Gordon papers and has not consulted many essential manuscript collections which were available to him. He does not give the impression that he understands the broader economic and political context in which Gordon worked. A comparison with the recent biography of Gordon's contemporary, C.D. Howe, by Robert Bothwell and William Kilbourn indicates how much Schull has missed and, in some cases, how much he has misunderstood.

As an admirer of some of Schull's earlier work, I must admit that this biography disappointed me greatly. Those who commissioned the work must share my feeling even more keenly. By producing this biography, the author and the publisher have assured that there must be another one. We do not yet know why this Scot was great.

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Lairds and Improvement in the Scotland of the Enlightenment.

Edited by T.M. Devine. (Dundee, 1979.) pp. 70. L3 (Copies available from Dr. I.B. Cowan, Department of Scottish History, University of Glasgow, 9 University Gardens, Glasgow, G12 8QH, Scotland.)

However accurately a historical work may reflect the current state of knowledge at its first appearance, it is inevitably left behind
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by the ongoing flow of research. On the other hand it is unlikely that a book will be immediately revised, and recent work all too frequently remains locked away in the obscurity of academic theses known only to a handful of scholars working in the immediate field. The task of communicating recent research in Scottish history has not been eased by the relative scarcity of periodicals devoted to the field, and this alone is enough to make us welcome the decision of the organizers of the Scottish Historical Conference to publish papers presented at that biennial gathering thus affording access to a wider audience than the actual participants.

The present work consists of seven essays which broadly relate to questions of landownership and agrarian change between the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, the theme of the Ninth Scottish Historical Conference, held in Edinburgh in 1978. In fact, however, the range of subjects is somewhat wider than the title of the collection might indicate, for there are contributions dealing with such diverse topics as state aid to industry, the work of Robert Adam the architect, the links between banking, industry and agriculture, together with more mainstream papers dealing with rural change. Perhaps the most noticeable is the absence of a contribution dealing with the dispossession of Highland tenants, which certainly falls within the period studied in this conference.

The only paper dealing with the Highlands is restricted to the somewhat atypical forfeited Jacobite estates. Is this subject not attracting the interest of Scottish historians at the present time? On the other hand, if the Highlands are not much in focus, there is an interesting paper devoted to a little known segment of Scotland, if indeed it is part of Scotland, seventeenth and eighteenth century Shetland. The author describes the gradual transformation of landownership and the economy during its transition from the social dominance of Norwegian lords, through Scottish lairds, to merchants, changes accompanied by the transformation of agriculture to the point where it was actually discouraged in the interest of fishing and the tenants held to that task by the fetters of debt-bondage. Several papers betray their origin as lectures, for they could have been profitably expanded in the printed version, and they occasionally create an oversimplified impression which I am sure their authors would be the first to qualify if given an opportunity. One must also question one contributor's apparent equation of lairds with
smaller landowners in the context of the eighteenth century. A good many eighteenth century lairds were very substantial landowners, even if they were not members of the peerage. But such minor criticisms in no way detract from the value of this publication, which it is to be hoped will be sufficiently well received to justify a similar volume following subsequent conferences.

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Once there was a Scotsman. Now there are millions of the beggars.

John Grierson was one of the millions; and maybe one in a million, except that the same description would probably be claimed by the 999,999 others. He cut a wide swathe, in Scotland and elsewhere; he created the British documentary school against any odds available. We do get the impression that if the odds had not been available, Grierson would have invented them. He liked a fight. He founded the Canadian Film Board. In his latter years he even became a television personality.

Here are some of the other Griersons: the writer, the polemicist, the philosopher, the pamphleteer, the incurably articulate Scot. John Grierson's Scotland is an anthology of the argumentative doctor's bits and pieces in print, garnered from a span of 35 years, and garnered lovingly, by his friend and disciple Forsyth Hardy.

Before I say another word, the book should be read. It is worth the money. It is scholarly, wise, visionary, misguided, embarrassing and never dull; well, very very rarely.

I offer the encomium and the recommendation first, because what follows may not be entirely reverential. I never revered The Doc. In the years of our acquaintance (I will even claim it as friendship) I often clashed head-on with him, to our mutual pleasure. I suspect the late Roy Thomson has less pleasure in such
encounters. He once said (and I had John’s own testimony to this), “I enjoy an argument with you, John.” To which Grierson retorted, “You flatter yourself. I never argue except with equals or superiors.” And probably added mentally that the latter were gey thin on the ground.

In any case, Grierson’s own technique of book-reviewing (and this volume has several entertaining examples) was to absorb the book and then declare, in essence, “This is Scotland. I am John Grierson, and not necessarily in that order. I shall use this book to demonstrate those facts.” I, Cliff Hanley, shall adopt the good doctor’s own technique.

Late one evening, in a well-stocked house in Glasgow’s tooney West End, he made some pontifical statement about the nature and the philosophic roots of Scottish music-hall comedy. Having myself worked in that trade for twenty years, I could only say, “My dear Doctor, I regret to inform you your bum’s oot the windy.” He checked in mid-flight, cerebrated, and replied, “You know, you’re probably right. But I had to say something.”

Oh, fast on his feet, the darling man. There is no answer to such a retort but to clasp him to your heart with hoops of steel.

And after all, we Scots hobo-intellectuals do feel entitled to be authorities on everything. Omniscience is our birthright. Grierson did know a heck of a lot. He was one kind of archtypal Scot, the incurable student. He had in his bone marrow Goethe’s dictum, ’Connect, always connect.’ Everything he learned, minute by minute through his life, he fed into everything that had gone before, reorganised the data bank, modified the hypotheses, and came up with a new conclusion worth hearing.

The essential Grierson remained. Here we have him writing about his Scotland (yes, we all own Scotland). Like so many of us, he found an attitude of besotted exasperation. He spent much of his life away from the place. Why not? If it cut him off from the day-to-day nonsense of the country, maybe it gave him a larger perspective. He knew about the engineering genius of the place, and he knew about its compulsive urge to ca’ the feet from itself — Dundee, totally dependent on jute, exporting its mechanical expertise to India to ensure its own disasters, for instance.

When he writes, with love, about the Scottish knack of shipbuilding, he sees a golden future. Were he here today, he would
not. But with the data available at the time, he did as good a job as any seer.

The ickiest chapter in the Grierson book is about a journey to the Highlands, in the company of Cavalcanti and Basil Wright. I wish I had been there. But when he adds a sketch of a film that might be made about the Clearances, I recognise it instantly in the category of Films I'm Glad They Never Made.

But we move from that at once to a subjective, and masterly, analysis of the character of Jamie the Saxt. The excuse is an academic book on the subject by a completist American. The description of James's death is Grierson's own.

Poor James. The muscles of his face caved in and his jaw dropped; his tongue swelled; he suffocated in phlegm; and his divine authority sank without trace in a sea of dysentery. James was unfaithful to Predestination when he got to England. Predestination was certainly faithful to him.

On Boswell, the dear doctor (Grierson, I mean) is illuminating and very much himself. On the splendid James Bridie, he is critical and affectionate. This reviewer for one would not tolerate a writer who didn't have affection for Bridie. Grierson finds parallels, and I am grateful, between Rob Roy MacGregor and the Chicago mobsters. That doesn't mean that he dismisses Rob Roy. He simply finds a logical context for the outlaw's career.

One man also has good and generous words to say about William Lyon Mackenzie King. Grierson died too soon, I think, to learn about King's habit of consulting dead matriarchs and dogs. It is doubtful if he would have changed his mind. As a student — a sceptical student, but a student — of Marx, he would probably stand by his assessment of the objective achievements of that very strange Prime Minister. And it may be he would be right.

John lived for cinema. Well, it's still with us. He lived for the dissemination of truth through the cinema. Well, among the pablum which is always with us, there is some truth, even subversive truth, in our cinema. At its best and worst, some people find it shocking. He would not have found it shocking. A hard man to shock, our dear Doc. He might have been puzzled. He might have quarrelled with it. Oh aye, he would have quarrelled with it.
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But cantankerous and carnaptious would not be the words for the man that emerges from this densely packed collection of comments. He is prickly and obstinate and fairly brilliant, and as warm and likeable as a good toddy. And when he says that the teachers are our most important people, you realise he has adroitly fooled you into being educated, when you thought he was only telling you a tale.

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