
The title of Richard J. Finlay's study of the origins of the Scottish National Party (SN), "Independent and Free", might lead some to believe that this is a romantic portrayal of the emergence north of the Tweed of a political party dedicated to throwing off the English yoke. In truth, this is a balanced account of both the triumphs and failures of the early years of this Scottish political party. Over half of the book, covering the years 1918 to 1934, is devoted to the forerunners of the SNP, including the Scottish Home Rule Association (SHRA), the Scots National League (SNL), the National Party of Scotland (NPS) and the Scottish Party; the merger of the latter two organizations created the SNP in 1934. As Finlay ably shows throughout the book, the SNP and its antecedents were continually plagued by the inchoate aspirations of their supporters, which essentially reflected the split between those who favoured outright independence from England and those who preferred a devolution of powers in some form of Scottish home rule. Thus, the struggle between these two viewpoints is the central theme of Finlay's book.

In the decade following the First World War, the SHRA emerged as the principal organization promoting Scottish home rule, while the SNL became the voice of "complete" Scottish independence. Finlay argues that the naive tactics employed by the SHRA to convince the established British political parties to support Scottish home rule and the "farcical" nature of the SNL's attempts to "re-Celticize Scotland" ensured that neither organization moved beyond the fringe of Scottish politics. With
the demise of the SHRA in 1928-1929, the NPS became the leading advocate of Scottish self-government. From the outset, the fledgling NPS was mired in a conflict between what Finlay calls the “fundamentalists” (those who sought complete Scottish independence) and “moderates” (those who opposed separation from the United Kingdom). The direction taken by the NPS was largely determined by the efforts of the strong-willed John MacCormick, the party’s sometime president and honourary secretary. MacCormick progressively moved towards the “moderate” position and he was instrumental in orchestrating the expulsion of leading “fundamentalists” in 1933, which Finlay sees as a turning point in the party’s history. After the expulsion of “fundamentalists”, MacCormick was able to bring about the merger in 1934 between the NPS and the Scottish Party, a loose association of prominent Scots committed to a moderate form of Scottish home rule. Finlay offers a very balanced assessment of MacCormick’s role in the creation of the SNP and his subsequent dominance over the party, challenging the earlier, often hostile, accounts of so-called “King John”. MacCormick’s reign over the SNP came to an end in 1942 when the candidate he favoured for the position of party chairman lost to Douglas Young, the choice of the “fundamentalists”. Under the new leadership, Finlay insists, the SNP became a “more vibrant and healthy” party. “By the middle of 1944,” Finlay concludes, “the modern Scottish National Party had clearly begun to take shape.”

This book has many strengths but it also has several weaknesses. Finlay’s discussion of the racialist undertones of the propaganda espoused by the SNL is superb, as he clearly demonstrates how the League’s interest in promoting “Celtic” culture often degenerated into “vulgar anti-English feeling” and “rampant anglophobia”. He rightly balances this judgment by reminding the reader that the SNL’s racialist ideas must be seen in the context that this type of thinking “was fairly common in many parts of Europe during the interwar years.” While Finlay subjects the League’s racialist theories to an impressive analysis,
the same cannot be said for his treatment of the economic arguments employed by both the SNL and SHRA to support their calls for Scottish self-government. Finlay appears to accept the validity of their economic arguments, making little attempt to assess their accuracy in reading the economic needs of Scotland; his discussion of the economic policies of the SNP is slightly more evenhanded. In addition, the book would have benefitted from a more thorough proof-read. For instance, Finlay introduces several people in the book without providing sufficient information about their positions or relevance to the discussion and, at other times, he repeats a person’s full name, rank and position. And surely, the author meant to use the word “pressured” instead of “pressurised” on pages 101 and 209. An airplane’s cabin may be “pressurised”, but certainly not an individual or group (unless, of course, the author is referring to the “hot air” that accompanies most political movements). Overall, however, this is a welcome study which deserves to be read by those interested in modern Scottish (and British) history and by those scholars concerned with the way political parties evolve to deal with the conflicting aspirations of their members.

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