Scotland is fortunate to have had an individual the likes of Sir John Sinclair, who had the means and tenacity to undertake the formidable task of compiling a statistical of Scotland. In producing the Statistical Account Sinclair aimed to compile a large body of information which could be used to strengthen the political and economic development of the country. This, he reasoned, could be accomplished by pointing out the different areas where improvements were needed. In order to do this Sinclair sent out a questionnaire containing 160 questions to the ministers of every parish (938). In 1799, after nine long years of diligent work, his task was complete. Sinclair had successfully compiled a detailed account of the economic and social state of Scotland which might aid the government in determining where improvements were needed. More importantly, Sinclair had provided future generations with a unique and invaluable source for the history of Scotland in the late 18th century.

Sinclairs’ Statistical Account represents an invaluable source for the history of Scotland, yet one which has its problems. The sheer size of the Statistical Account, originally 20 massive volumes, is enough to make the task of researching a particular topic difficult and extremely time consuming. The present work by Maisie Steven addresses this problem by compiling information on a variety of topics within the Account in a readable, accessible format.

In Parish Life in the Eighteenth-Century the author sifts through the Old Statistical Account in order to explore a wide variety of topics. Included are such themes as dress, games and amusements, industry and occupations, agricultural improvements and emigration. The author’s expertise in the area of diet and
nutrition shows through when food is examined. The important place marriages, funerals and births held for the labouring population is also brought to life. As the author notes, all such events were a chance for socializing and merriment in a life otherwise full of toil. An important observation which illustrates that the regimented schedule imposed on workers by the Industrial Revolution had yet to reach many of Scotland's parishes. By the early decades of the 19th century many of the social activities enjoyed by the labouring population had all but disappeared under pressure from authorities and employers anxious to establish a disciplined work force.

The strength of Steven's work is that it brings together under one heading information from many different regions of Scotland. In doing this the author demonstrates the variety of experiences in Scotland and the similarities which existed over very diverse geographic regions. The Statistical Account provides important information on a society in transition. The present work brings this material together in a very readable and accessible fashion. An important resource for anyone interested in the Scotland of 200 years ago.

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