his work begins with a Foreword by series editor, Norman Macdougall, who opens with the assertion, “The early Stewart kings, perhaps understandably, have lacked biographers, but they have never been short of detractors” (p.ix), which ought to rank high on any list of understatements. Prof. Boardman’s offering is the first full length book to attempt an analysis of the reigns of the first two Stewart monarchs, for the boldness of the effort alone he should receive the deepest gratitude of any Scottish historian, professional or amateur. The fact that The Early Stewart Kings represents a supreme standard of scholarship, coupled with an obvious respect for his subject, makes it a very rare treat indeed. Rather than plead for his subjects, Prof. Boardman, with careful and extensive research, his bibliography exceeds ten pages, sets out to illustrate “When the early Stewart kings are assessed within [their] environment they emerge as rather more than a hopelessly incompetent double act, staggering
from one disastrous public appearance to the next.” (p. xvi) With this as his goal, The Early Stewart Kings, is a rare triumph.

Like most modern historians, Prof. Boardman looks at late fourteenth century Scotland with a realistic eye, he does not hold to the theory that the only good monarch is a forceful absolutist, and explains the reigns of Robert II and III in this context. Boardman is also careful to explain that in 1371 Robert II inherited the massive power of local magnates, especially those of the Douglases in the south, and the Lordship of the Isles in the west, from his predecessors, and that forty years of baronial politicking made him aware of the futility of any attempt at uniting them under himself, instead Robert II’s policy was to unite the magnates with himself. In the end, Boardman’s assessment of Robert II, counter to popular belief was that “it seems unlikely that the most successful, ambitious and ruthless Scottish magnate of the 1340s and 1350s suddenly awoke on 23 February 1371 as a man unable to deal with the political hurly-burly of the Scottish kingdom.” (p. 172) Robert II is characterized as a man with a firm grasp of the realities of Scottish politics, and determined to use sharp deals and marriage alliances to manipulate the decentralized nature of the Scottish nation to advantage, Boardman sees him as successful as any other Scottish king.

With Robert III, Boardman uses the argument that his rise in 1384 was encouraged by his father, and that his marginalization after 1388 was due to the loss
of nearly every one of his supporting magnates at Otterburn, either by death or capture, leaving Robert of Albany in the ascendant. But Prof. Boardman does not stop there, tracing the torturous path of this reign, Boardman unfolds a tale of a man with a tenacity that has never been equaled. Utilizing Exchequer Rolls, household accounts and charter witnesses, Boardman illustrates that realizing his political marginalization in 1390, Robert III carefully worked behind the scenes to engineer the rise of his son David of Rothesay to the lieutenancy by the age of twenty-one. The fall of Rothesay in 1402 had a profound effect on Robert III, and he does not seem to recover until his slow emergence in 1404, to begin again with his sole surviving son, James. The events of 1406 are chronicled and examined with an expert eye, but the underlying pathos of a man going down for the last time makes its understatement all the more poignant. Boardman’s account of the burial of Robert III in Dunfermline instead of Scone is perhaps the best assessment of a reign distinguished by a succession of failures to assert royal authority, “Robert III evidently preferred to face eternity with the friendly ghost of his long departed kinsmen rather than bed down in the company of illustrious strangers.” (p. 297)

For all the scholarly triumph, *The Early Stewart Kings*, is heavy wading for those unfamiliar with all the players in the fourteenth century political game. Early in the book, Walter, the second son of Robert II is mentioned, married and dies off, only to have Robert’s
youngest son, also Walter appear later as the Earl of Caithness. At the ascension of Robert III, his second son, Robert, is mentioned in connection with his older brother David twice, only to disappear without any explanation. On the death of Rothesay, another son, James, makes an abrupt and unannounced appearance. There are genealogies of the major families in the book, but sons that die, like Walter and Robert, are not listed in these tables, which presents the unwary reader with quite a problematic situation. The genealogies have one other particular failing, wives and daughters rarely appear in them, and as one of Boardman’s most prominent points is the marriage alliances of Robert II as political stabilizers, this lack seems inexplicable. It might also prove helpful when navigating the Scottish tradition of naming children after their parents. At one point the reader is confronted with Euphemia Ross, the second wife of Robert II, Euphemia Ross, Countess of Ross, and the confusion multiplies when we meet the Countess’ daughter, Euphemia.

Aside from these small difficulties, The Early Stewart Kings, is a definite must read for anyone with an interest in the period, or the Stewart Dynasty in general. As a ground breaking work, this biography is well researched and well presented, without erring on the dry and scholarly side. Prof. Boardman deserves praise and congratulations on his definitive portrayal of Robert II and Robert III.

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