REVIEW


The histories of Ulster and the Highlands and Islands are intimately connected and yet there is a tendency to treat them separately, particularly in the early modern and modern periods. This book is a refreshing change because it considers both regions together and because it works to establish the extent to which ecclesiastical ties bound the Gaels of Ulster and Scotland between 1560 and 1760.

MacDonald begins this book with the chapter ‘Gaelic Attitudes to Religion, 1560-c.1619’ and discusses the extent to which the reformed Church gained a foothold in the Highlands and Islands and in Ulster. Ironically, though not surprisingly, whilst the Scots were making a significant contribution to the Ulster plantation, the Irish had dedicated themselves to preserving Catholicism in the Highlands. Chapter two, ‘The Franciscan Mission to the Highlands and Islands, 1619-1637’, considers the Franciscan mission and emphasises Catholicism’s inability to make significant advances on account of financial hardship, a lack of missionaries and inadequate support from Rome despite Protestantism’s minimal presence. However, because these Irish missionaries sought political alliances with the elites, the bond between Ulster and the western Highlands was strengthened. In the third chapter, ‘The Entrenchment of Gaelic Presbyterianism, 1637-1689’, MacDonald highlights the role that the Kirk played in extending dissenting Protestantism in Ulster and shows how translating the
scriptures into Gaelic enhanced its appeal. The fourth chapter, ‘Seducing the People to Popery, 1638-1689’, focuses on the emerging tensions between the regular and secular Catholic clergy in Scotland. The growing power and influence of the Jesuits is noted and MacDonald points out that because three of the four Scots Colleges (Douai, Rome, and Madrid) were under their control by 1627, would-be missionaries were frequently poached. Despite the chronic shortage of priests, Rome worried about the networks and influence being established by the regular clergy and so the installation of William Ballantyne as Prefect Apostolic in 1653 was a step towards consolidating secular authority. In chapter five, ‘Gaelic Presbyterian Cooperation, 1690-1760’, MacDonald discusses the active role that the Crown played in facilitating the spread of Protestantism throughout the region. Jacobitism forced the Kirk to adopt a more pro-active role which eventually translated into greater security, but the Patronage and Toleration Acts would fracture Presbyterian unity. The final chapter, imaginatively titled ‘Fishers of Herring and the Priesthood of Aaron, 1690-1760’, draws attention to the contribution that the Irish priests made to the Catholic mission in the Highlands. Importantly, MacDonald points out that there were growing tensions between the Irish and Scottish clergy, and notes that the majority of those serving in the region were unfit and ill-equipped.

This meticulously researched book is an invaluable resource for Scottish and Irish historians, but the scarcity of source material meant that this was not an easy one to produce. The attention MacDonald pays to the Irish and Scottish and to the Presbyterian and Catholic dimensions is an important departure from past trends and should inspire more scholars to write inclusive studies. This book is important for the investigation of identities since she shows Ulster and the Highlands and Islands of Scotland as borderlands whose sacrifice ensured the emergence of the United Kingdom. One criticism might be her tendency to go into
too much detail – it is a substantial book that should not be attempted in one sitting, but rather it is a book that can be returned to again and again for information. Her critical analysis and scrutiny of the evidence enhances its value. For example, she argues that the government was not wrong to link an adherence to Catholicism with political motivation since it indicated a ‘firm rejection’ of the crown and state and reveals the pragmatism than many of the more politically ambitious clans exhibited when they thought it could help them acquire additional support for their claims. In addition, she also emphasises that much of the Protestant paranoia about a Catholic resurgence was unfounded since Catholicism had remained disorganised, weak and ineffective - jealousy, personal vendettas and ethnic tension conspired to prevent it from regaining any real level of consciousness until well into the nineteenth century. MacDonald’s sensitive and scholarly treatment of this tumultuous phase of history will encourage readers to reflect upon religion’s role as an imperial instrument.

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