REVIEW


The history of the family in medieval and early modern Scotland has been largely overlooked by historians in the past. Fortunately, this lacuna is beginning to be corrected, thanks in large part to the recently published interdisciplinary collaboration Finding the Family in Medieval and Early Modern Scotland, edited by Elizabeth Ewan, University Research Chair and Professor of History at the University of Guelph, and Janay Nugent, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Lethbridge.

In the ‘Acknowledgements’ section of the book, the editors note that the topic of the Scottish family was first explored at a Scottish Studies Colloquium at the University of Guelph in 2000 and then in a special guest issue of Scottish Tradition (now IRSS) in 2002. Noting the dearth of work associated with the history of the family in Scotland before 1750 which was highlighted as a result of these two events provided the stimulus for the current volume. Finding the Family brings together offerings from historians based in a number of countries, including Scotland, England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, who present articles which discuss a wide range of aspects pertaining to the history of the Scottish family between 1300 and 1750. The diversity of the contributors – and the diversity of the sources they consult and methodologies they employ, including those related to art history, literature, music, gender studies, anthropology, history and religious studies – helps to highlight the emerging, exciting, and dynamic aspects of historical enquiry which are informing and driving this branch of Scottish history.

This is particularly evident in the first section of the book, which explicitly examines the types of sources (legal, religious,
and even musical) available to medieval and early modern scholars interested in Scottish family history. Cynthia Neville and Scott Moir, respectively, use medieval land charters and kirk and criminal court records to discuss the effects of stress upon the family, whether this came from the complications of medieval land passage or the witch panics of the seventeenth century. The articles written by Katie Barclay and Dolly MacKinnon, meanwhile, use ballads and music to discuss marital, familial, and household relationships in the early modern period.

The second section of Finding the Family focuses on family roles. The role of parenting is explored by Melissa Hollander, who uses the kirk session records of St Cuthbert's, Edinburgh, in her examination of the construction of parenthood, and particularly fatherhood, between 1560 and 1625, and by David Mullan, who employs religious autobiographies and narratives to unpack the religious construction of parenting and the emotional bonds that connected parents and children. The articles by Gordon Desbrisay and Karen Sander Thomson, meanwhile, and by Barbara Murison, discuss the roles of husbands and wives both within and without the household and illustrate that long-held assumptions of the role of wives – particularly in the economic sphere – might not always be accurate.

The third and final section of the book focuses on a broader definition of ‘family,’ and focuses not only on the relationships of people of blood kin, but also the family’s relationship with the wider community. This is includes the spiritual community, through Mairi Cowan’s exploration of religious fraternities; the political community, through Alison Cathcart’s discussion of the role of marriage, procreation, fostering, and bondage as a way of better understanding the Highland clan system; and the social community, through Rob Falconer’s study of Aberdeen assault cases and the resulting illumination of the networks of kinship ties which existed in that burgh. The impact of economic and criminal upheaval on the family and the wider community, meanwhile, is explored through Karen Cullen’s article, which focuses on economic crisis and the impact that had for both individual families and the wider community; and through Deborah Symonds’ investigation of one failed Perthshire relationship and the implications that had on the wider community.
This broad combination of themes and approaches results in a book, which is both interesting and guaranteed to engender further interest in the myriad ways in which the medieval and early modern family in Scotland can be investigated and understood. In addition to the new ground broken by the articles themselves, it is similarly heartening to note the areas of potential further research and suggestions of new directions for study *Finding the Family* seeks to highlight, both in the articles themselves and in the ‘Guide to Further Reading’ found at the back of the collection. Such dynamism, inclusivity, and forward-thinking on the parts of the contributors and editors indicates that while this may be one of the first collections to focus on the family in medieval and early modern Scotland, more innovative work on the family in medieval and early modern Scotland is sure to follow.

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