

Review Article – The State of Scottish Imperial Historiography

James M. Mackenzie and T.M. Devine, *Scotland and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 344pp., ISBN: 9780199573240, £36.00.

Mario Varricchio (ed.), *Back to Caledonia: Scottish Homecoming from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2012), xvi + 292pp., ISBN: 9781906566449, £25.00.

Stephen Conway, *Britain, Ireland and Continental Europe in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 356pp., ISBN: 9780199210855, £71.00.

Within the last thirty years, the study of imperial history has made a remarkable resurgence, recovering from its nadir in the 1980s. One of the reasons for this recovery, in terms of interest levels and publications, has been the ability of the discipline to reinvent itself. This is partially due to a consensus to largely abandon the traditional focus of examining a fixed relationship between the British Isles as a whole and the various colonies. An alternative put forward more recently has been a ‘four nations’ approach echoing both a general loosening of political and cultural ties across the United Kingdom as well as non-imperial-orientated histories of the British Isles by Hugh Kearney and Frank Welsh.¹ This gave historians of each nation – England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales – the opportunity to assess their own historical relationship with the British Empire. It is only since the 1990s that a strong Scottish imperial historiography has developed, which is surprisingly multifaceted. Two of the principal drivers of this historiography have undoubtedly been T.M. Devine and John M. Mackenzie. Devine’s *Scotland’s Empire* has provided Scottish history with its first truly academic reflection on the subject, while Mackenzie’s work has shed crucial light on the continuing importance of Scottish national identity amongst Scots who served the empire.²

It is, in many ways, appropriate that the first full collection of essays specifically concerning Scottish imperial history, entitled *Scotland and the British Empire*, has been edited by Mackenzie and Devine. As part of the Oxford History of the British Empire series, this collection has brought together many of the most notable scholars of their field which hints at the greater specialisation within Scottish imperial history. For instance contributor Andrew Mackillop has emerged as an

¹ Hugh Kearney, *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Frank Welsh, *The Four Nations: A History of the United Kingdom* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

² T.M. Devine, *Scotland’s Empire 1600-1815* (London: Penguin, 2003) and James M. Mackenzie, ‘Empire and National Identities: The Case of Scotland’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series., 8 (1998).

expert in the role that Scots played in the British imperial military while Angela McCarthy has become highly regarded in the study of Scottish emigration. The book's introduction contains an interesting warning about the direction of the recent trends, 'there is a danger in all this activity and that lies in the possible creation of a new myth, that of Scots exceptionalism'.³

This exceptionalism implies that the Scottish contribution to the British Empire was not only unique but also innately superior. Histories invoking this myth of exceptionalism characterise the actions of Scots, while building the Empire, as being more enlightened and morally benign. Niall Ferguson praised Scots in the service of the East India Company for being more willing to marry Indian women and embrace local culture than their stuffy English colleagues.⁴ Quite possibly the most blatant and worryingly widely read example of Scottish exceptionalism has been Arthur Herman's work published in 2002, unambiguously titled *The Scottish Enlightenment: the Scots' Invention of the Modern World*.⁵ Herman effectively painted the Scots as an almost ridiculously gifted people, intellectually and creatively, and that the Scottish Diaspora granted the rest of the world the wonderful opportunity to learn from them. Although, to be fair, Herman does graciously acknowledge in the preface that, 'the Scots did not do everything by themselves: other nations – Germans, French, Italians, Russians and even the English have their place in the making of the modern world'.⁶

Thankfully such instances of Scottish exceptionalism are easily identified and, within academic circles, relatively easily ignored. There is unfortunately another, less apparent but more dangerous flaw within the historiography, which I would characterise this flaw as being a misconception of Scottish enthusiasm. Essentially, there now exists an unjustified consensus that Scots were generally enthusiastic as to the British Empire, throughout the time of its expansion. Andrew Thompson, in an essay examining the framework of the British State in relation to the Empire, sums up this trend stating that the Scots were, 'the first peoples of the British Isles to take on an imperial mentality, and possibly the longest to sustain one. In the spheres of education, engineering, exploration, medicine, commerce, and shipping, the Scots earned a particularly strong reputation for empire building'.⁷

³ James M. Mackenzie and T.M. Devine, *Scotland and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 9.

⁴ Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), p. 124.

⁵ Arthur Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Scots' Invention of the Modern World* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

⁷ Andrew Thompson, 'Empire and the British State' in Sarah E. Stockwell (ed), *The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), p. 51.

When Scotland's eighteenth-century history especially is examined, this analysis simply does not fit. After all for much of this period Scottish society not only had to adjust to the effects of Britain's expanding empire but also to residing in an entirely new state. It is with this issue firmly in mind this article shall consider the three works. The misconception of Scottish enthusiasm is unfortunately a chief discrepancy of Devine and Mackenzie's volume, which becomes apparent particularly within the first essay, written by T.M. Devine and Phillip Rossner. This essay discusses Scottish connections to the Atlantic Economy of the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries. Devine and Rossner discuss in some detail the multiple roles which Scots played in maintaining and expanding the Caribbean slave system, whether as wealthy slave traders or as overseers.⁸ However no mention is made of individual Scots who advocated or worked towards abolition such as Zachary Macaulay and James Beattie; the essay also ignores the views of the Scottish *literati* and Kirk ministers who were largely in favour of abolition. A basic misassumption often made by Scottish imperial historians is that participation in any imperial expansion automatically implies enthusiasm for all aspects of the empire. Economic hardship or simply fewer opportunities for advancement at home were often far more powerful motivations for Scots to serve in India as an East India Company officer, or as a slave overseer in Jamaica. Scotland's national bard Robert Burns was a famous opponent of the Slave trade and yet at a point in his life when his farm had suffered several financial reverses, Burns considered leaving Scotland for Jamaica to work as a slave overseer.

Another instance in which Scottish enthusiasm is challenged is of course in emigration to Britain's colonies. The nature, scale and development of this migration have actually been very well documented by the older historiography concerning the Scottish Diaspora dating back to the nineteenth century. Two of the earliest and most well read examples were J.H. Burton's *The Scot Abroad* and W.J. Rattray's *The Scot in British North America*, published in four volumes.⁹ A more recent development in this area is the gradual merging of Diaspora studies with imperial history, which has been expressed most clearly by Marjory Harper and Stephen Constantine's *Migration and Empire*.¹⁰ One area in which Diaspora Studies has been deficient is in examining the process of return migration. This process has for the first time been properly explored in *Back to Caledonia*, a collection of papers edited by Mario Varricchio. Varricchio commented on the relative progress of return migration from a purely British perspective, but this is different when analysed from the viewpoint of the four particular nations, 'As we shall see, the picture is even

⁸ James M. Mackenzie, and T.M. Devine, *Scotland and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 30-53.

⁹ J.H. Burton, *The Scot Abroad* (London, 1864) and W.J. Rattray, *The Scot in British North America* (Edinburgh, 1880).

¹⁰ Marjory Harper and Stephen Constantine, *Migration and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

gloomier with regard to studies devoted to Britain's distinct nationalities, though in the last few years an awakening of interest in Scottish return has taken place, which is confirmed by the publication of this volume'.¹¹

The volume forms an interesting mix of contributions from experienced scholars such as Steve Murdoch and Cairns Craig, as well as post-doctoral fellows, which were originally part of a conference held at the University of Edinburgh. For the purposes of further testing the misconception of Scottish enthusiasm for empire, considering return migration potentially offers some valuable insights into Scottish attitudes to emigration. Examining the experience of returning migrants can also shed light on the economic and political state of Scotland at the particular time. This is the case in Graeme Morton's essay 'Returning Nationalists, Returning Scotland', where the return of James Grant and Theodore Napier sheds new light on the nature of nineteenth-century Scottish politics. *Back to Caledonia's* scope is undoubtedly wide-ranging with papers spanning 400 years, beginning with Steve Murdoch's seventeenth-century study of the repatriation of Scottish mercantile capital from the Low Countries and ending with David McCrone and Frank Bechhofer's paper on returning migrants in the twenty first century. There is also some engagement with imperial issues in papers relating to missionaries and colonial settlers.

Sadly a chronological assessment of the collection presents an obvious mismatch, only one of the twelve papers relates to the eighteenth-century. This is an unfortunate deficiency because it was this period when emigration was perceived as being greatly harmful by the majority of Scots, as a nation's strength was thought to rest on having a large and growing population. George McGilvray's 'Return of the Scottish Nobob, 1725-1833' essay discusses the experience of Scots who made their fortune in the service of the East Indian Company and then chose to return home, as well as the resulting political and economic impact they had. Unfortunately he has taken a Scottish exceptionalist line on the issue stating that these Scottish nabobs were almost universally well received upon their return when compared with England, 'The difference in reaction between north and south suggests certain traits unique to Scotland – or just that it was smaller and less cosmopolitan... Horace Walpole's complaint, in 1761, that "conquerors, nabobs and victorious admirals attack every borough" was not quite true north of the Tweed'.¹²

¹¹ Mario Varricchio (ed.), *Back to Caledonia: Scottish Homecoming from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2012), p. 12.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 97.

Although the view that Scottish society could see the returning nabobs in a positive light is valid, Mcgilvray offers limited evidence to support this assertion. He also fails to adequately engage with the historiography that challenges this perspective, beyond a reference to a paper by Alan Karras, particularly John Dwyer and Alexander Murdoch's chapter on eighteenth-century Scottish politics which discusses how the nabobs were often deeply resented by the landed gentry.¹³

Perhaps the primary flaw however with *Back to Caledonia* is the assumption that Scottish migration turned very quickly away from mainland Europe towards Britain's colonies following the Act of Union, which has previously been hypothesised by T.M. Devine.¹⁴ Other historians such as David Dickson, Jan Permentier and Jane Ohlmeyer point to Scottish involvement in various trading networks continuing well into the eighteenth-century.¹⁵ It is on the issue of these continuing ties between Scotland and the European mainland that we turn to our final reviewed book Stephen Conway's *Britain, Ireland and Continental Europe in the Eighteenth Century*. While Conway's work does not specifically concern imperial history, or indeed Scotland, it offers an intriguing alternative for perceiving the true place of the empire in eighteenth-century Scottish society. In the introduction Conway stresses that the most recent historical literature has overstated transatlantic connections at the expense of the continent. By contrast Conway's study offers, a different way of looking at Britain and Ireland's relationship with continental Europe. It acknowledges areas of difference and distinctiveness, but points to areas of similarity. It accepts that both Britain and Ireland were part of an Atlantic and wider imperial world, but highlights their under-recognised connections with the rest of Europe.¹⁶ The central objective of Conway's work, therefore, is to show how most people in the British Isles, as well as the new British state, remained primarily focused on continental concerns. A powerful case is made in support of this argument by examining not just military and commercial connections but also intellectual exchanges through religion, enlightenment or the traditional aristocratic Grand Tour. The one frustrating element of Conway's thesis is a tendency to neglect potential differences across the four nations of Britain. That is not to say that specifically Scottish issues are not addressed. For instance the continuing ties between Scottish and Dutch Protestants are discussed when

¹³ John Dwyer and Alexander Murdoch, 'Paradigms and Politics: Manners, Morals and the Rise of Henry Dundas, 1770-1784' in John Dwyer, Roger Mason, and Alexander Murdoch, (eds) *New Perspectives on the Politics and Culture of Early Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1982), pp. 210-248.

¹⁴ Devine, *Scotland's Empire: 1600-1815*, p. 26.

¹⁵ David Dickson, Jan Parmentier, and Jane Ohlmeyer, (eds) *Irish and Scottish Mercantile Networks in Europe and Overseas in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Gent: Academia Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Stephen Conway, *Britain, Ireland and Continental Europe in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 2.

considering the end of the 1745-6 Jacobite Revolt, when Dutch soldiers arrived in Scotland to assist the British army.¹⁷ This generalisation is in some ways surprising given previous writings by Conway where he challenges key aspects of Linda Colley's *Britons*. Colley's principal argument is that the imperial Anglo-French struggles of the eighteenth-century secured the Union and fostered a true British identity, allowing for future prosperity and greater political stability.¹⁸

While Conway acknowledges that aspects of Colley's argument are quite persuasive regarding the American Revolutionary War and the Napoleonic Wars, he largely believes that it cannot be applied for most of the eighteenth-century and that these conflicts could also divide the peoples of Great Britain, 'It would be a mistake, however to assume from this a simple process of linear progression, reaching its culmination in the great struggles of 1793-1815. There was no relentless upward trajectory, but rather a jagged, faltering movement forward.'¹⁹

Within Conway's oversight, though, is surely an opportunity for Scottish historians to further build upon these ideas and test them within a specifically Scottish historical context. The emergence of a historiography which directly assesses Scotland's place in the British Empire is in itself an encouraging development, opening up a previously underappreciated avenue of historical thought. However two clear flaws have appeared which cannot be ignored, these are the myth of Scottish exceptionalism and the misconception of Scottish enthusiasm. With too much attention paid to proving imperial enthusiasm, historians can actually start to recreate older myths that existed in the individual focused historiography, which has been skewered by Edward Cowan in his analysis of traditional myths relating to Scottish immigrants to Canada.²⁰

Devine and Mackenzie's collection of essays offers a full assessment of the state of the Scottish imperial historiography. The collection reveals the field's evolution to become far more multifaceted but unfortunately also highlights the overriding flaw of the misconception of Scottish enthusiasm. *Back to Caledonia* is undoubtedly an interesting contribution to Diaspora Studies. However, although its purpose was obviously not to directly assess Scotland's connections to the Empire, it still presents a missed opportunity to present an alternative and more nuanced picture of Scottish migration. To a great extent this opportunity is taken up by

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 294-95.

¹⁸ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 322.

¹⁹ Stephen Conway, 'War and National Identity in the Mid-Eighteenth-Century British Isles' *The English Historical Review* (Sep, 2001), pp. 863-4.

²⁰ Edward Cowan, "The Myth of Scotch Canada" in Marjory Harper and Michael E. Vance, (eds), *Myth, Migration and the Making of Memory. Scotia and Nova Scotia, c. 1700-1990* (Halifax, Nova Scotia and Edinburgh: Fernwood and John Donald, 1999), p. 66.

Stephen Conway. His work effectively issues a challenge to Scottish historians for their own analysis of eighteenth-century history.

That individual Scottish enthusiasm for the Empire existed is undoubtedly true but that alone cannot be used to prove Scottish society was enamoured with all aspects imperial of expansion. Therefore as this new historiography emerges it is necessary to at least recognise the other side of this debate, namely that Scots could also be sceptical as well as enthusiastic about the supposed benefits of the British Empire for all the reasons this paper has referred to above. A failure to do so would only weaken its credibility and offer a skewed view of Scottish history as a whole.

Gains Murdoch²¹

University of Aberdeen

²¹ Gains Murdoch's (r01gkm11@abdn.ac.uk) academic interests have largely concerned Scotland's role in and attitudes towards the development of the British Empire in the eighteenth-century. He holds an MA (Hons) in History (2010) and a Mlit in Modern Historical Studies (2011) which were both achieved at the University of Aberdeen. His PhD considers possible Scottish scepticism towards the presumed benefits of imperial expansion from 1695-1815.