

Victorian and Edwardian Scotland

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A review of

Graeme Morton, *Ourselves and Others: Scotland 1832-1914* (New History of Scotland Series: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). ISBN 978-0-7486-2049-4, Paperback, 320pp, £19.99.

Graeme Morton once asked where nineteenth-century Scotland was.¹ He appears to have found it, and it was an intriguing place filled with inconsistencies, paradoxes and quirks, interesting people doing interesting things, a country on the cusp of modernity but still clinging resolutely and superstitiously to its age-old traditions. In parts of the country during the 1880s a chamber pot filled with salt greeted the bride and groom in the bedroom on their wedding night to ward off the ‘evil eye’ and, more importantly perhaps, to act as an aphrodisiac should such a fillip be required (p. 60). At the same time Scotland was the second most urbanised country in the world. Only in England did more people live in towns of over 20,000 inhabitants. The Scots were not altogether sure whether they liked their new modern environment though. Scots have always struggled to see ‘ourselves’ as an urban people Morton suggests, and living in a town was something that had to be endured, an inconvenience even (p. 81). He is probably right. Flick through the press reports of Burns Night or St Andrew’s Day in nineteenth-century Scotland (or throughout the diaspora) and a pattern will emerge from the after-dinner speeches. There will be numerous allusions to Scotland’s educational, industrial and commercial achievements at home and abroad; yet the imagery recalled will be of rugged glens, glistening burns, and heather-covered hills. A romantic image of Scotland – a Highland image largely – resting alongside the realities of its modern, industrial society. One of the many strengths of Morton’s book is his ability to tease out these dualities. The style in which he writes lends itself well to this type of work. He has the lightness of touch necessary, a prose style which is to the point and appreciates the fact

¹ R. J. Morris and Graeme Morton, ‘Where was nineteenth-century Scotland?’, *The Scottish Historical Review*, LXXIII: no. 195, (April 1994), 89-99.

that this is a book just as likely to be picked up in a high street bookshop as it is in a university library. It is, of course, a serious book built upon solid foundations and the latest scholarly research as befits a title in the New History of Scotland series; but it is also filled with interesting information about people and their lives and that is what good social history is after all.

In one sense it takes a step away from the book it replaces in the series. Sydney and Olive Checkland's *Industry and Ethos* (1984), was more noticeably concerned with the nation's industrial development (though not exclusively by any means). Morton's book is less so (though again industry is not altogether neglected). One needs only to compare the front covers of the two books to see the subtle differences in approach throughout. Checkland chose an image of the Forth Bridge under construction. Morton went for a be-kilted piper serenading an emperor penguin somewhere in the Antarctic. Perhaps it symbolises the quirks of the people it celebrates. In 1890 the ferryman at North Connel got drunk, fell off his seat and lost one of his oars much to the consternation of his passengers, including Revd J. Calder MacPhail, who was so shocked at the behaviour that he wrote to complain (p. 109); while a Constable Neil Rankine was reprimanded by his superiors for 'irregular behaviour' no doubt linked to his fondness for tinkers' whisky (p. 246). Of course alongside the coarser aspects of everyday Scottish life, Scots did things of great magnitude too: Thomas Chalmers amongst the urban poor or Andrew Carnegie in the cause of philanthropy (p. 98, 264).

Morton, then, balances the everyday and the extraordinary. He employs a number of conceptual frameworks to do so including 'objectification theory' which he borrows from gender studies. Morton uses self-objectification 'to analyse the inter-relationship of "ourselves" and "others"'. In short, what contemporaries thought was happening to themselves and the nation, and what those external to the nation thought of Scotland and the Scots. This approach on its own would most likely be inadequate given that contemporaries'

perceptions of themselves and others were not always accurate, and so good old-fashioned socio-economic history is needed to bulk out the abstraction. The end result, as Morton sees it, 'is a narrative history book' but one 'formed in the interplay of personal identity (*myself*), the framework of the nation (*ourselves*) and the knowledge of others'. (p. 5).

The interplays Morton describes are well exemplified in chapter 11, 'Emigration and Diaspora'. Here the focus is on those Scots who did not live in Scotland and those not born in Scotland but who readily identified with it. Together they constituted Scotland's extended self and were the creators of its diaspora. Such was the scale of emigration abroad that we can often be guilty of neglecting short-distance Scottish migration to the other constituent parts of the UK. Yet some 670,808 Scots left Scotland for England, Wales and Ireland between 1841 and 1921 (p. 250). Some settled permanently, others were merely short-term sojourners following shipbuilding contracts to north-east Ulster and northern England. Propinquity to the homeland did not lessen the desire of these migrant Scots to join together in regular celebrations of Scottishness and St Andrew's societies and Burns clubs were to be found in places like Belfast, Newcastle, Liverpool and Manchester, just as they were in Wellington, Toronto or Melbourne. Thus ethnic association nurtured a sense of Scottish identity abroad no matter how near or far the Scots were from home (p. 253).

There are signs that changes are afoot in academic publishing. The monograph faces an uncertain future as we inch seemingly inexorably towards a new era of Open Access. But accessible text books go from strength to strength and academic publishing houses will freely admit that they welcome text book proposals with open arms. It is scant wonder then that Edinburgh University Press is updating this series. The New History of Scotland's reputation was already well established. Carefully considered and well pitched additions like this book from Morton will surely only enhance it.

