

A HISTORY OF THE SCOTTISH PEOPLE 1560 – 1830 by T.C. Smout Review by Ronnie Glavin

GROUP REVIEW MEETING by SKYPE 27th April 2020.

Smout is social historian and so is interested in the people of Scotland in their many groups and communities. This is not a book for those interested in political intrigue amongst the courtiers of James VI. What he does is consider those factors that contributed to changes in Scotland over the period of review and how the people responded accordingly.

As he readily admits, this is a large topic and his biggest challenge as an author is to present a coherent picture that does not get bogged down with fine detail, but gives enough information to let the reader see where his conclusions have come from. Does he succeed? The consensus of the four of us who Skyped was that the challenge of the first part of his chosen time made for some heavy-going passages. For those who had little background knowledge of this period of history a significant amount of general background knowledge was assumed. I, for one, greatly appreciated having already read Professor Tom Devine's book on the Scottish Clearances, which also deals with some of the changes in 17th and 18th century Scotland. In Smout's defence, the 17th and 18th centuries saw many changes resulting from the Union of Crowns, the Civil War, the Union of Parliaments, the farming revolution, the beginnings of the industrial revolution and the influences of a dynamically changing Church of Scotland in its different phases.

We agreed that the second half of the book was much easier to read, I suspect that the harder work of assimilating the information in the first half was rewarded. Smout was particularly good at reviewing those factors he considered of importance in the development of The Scottish Enlightenment and the development of the industrial revolution. His account of the long and difficult working weeks of those employed in coal mining, textile manufacture and labour on the land pull no punches. Likewise, his review of life in the Highland communities contrasts the lot of real people with the characters romanticised fiction.

However, looking at this book from the perspective of a twenty first reader, albeit readers who have lived more of their lives in the twentieth century, we could see between the lines some of the values and attitudes that were more prevalent then. There was no reference to the impact of Scotland on the slave trade and its existence in those colonies that provided opportunities for Scots with aspirations. I looked up 'Slavery' in the detailed index with no success. Although women populate many of the chapters, especially those looking at working conditions in factories and mines and in an interesting section on witchcraft, the dominance of the patriarchy and the obstacles hindering females with aspirations must be inferred rather explicitly studied. I suspect that a writer with today's sensibilities would have given more attention to such challenges as well as conditions affecting immigrants from other parts of the world beyond England and Ireland. This is intended as an observation rather than a criticism of Smout personally, who was a man of his times.

Notwithstanding the comments above concerning the first half of the book, I found his writing to be generally approachable and with enough ideas to challenge some of my existing beliefs. He presented his material well, with an effective use of the few tables he included, and he left me with some vivid pictures. His account of Scotland as a rural country free from effective road travel, apart from those days following a period of hot dry weather conveys the lack of effective means of transportation by land and the relative isolation of the few towns in existence then.

Overall, A book that made me think and reflect on the 'mythology' of Scotland as I had understood the story of our country and I am glad that I invested the time and effort to read almost 500 pages of

quite dense text. The positives greatly outweighed those few negatives as demonstrated by our universal agreement to read his companion work dealing with the years 1830 – 1950 as our chosen book for May 2020.

Ronnie Glavin, 29th April 2020