

A CENTURY OF THE SCOTTISH PEOPLE 1830 – 1950 by T.C. Smout    Review by Ronnie Glavin

For U3A History Book Group meeting on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2020

This book continues in the same vein as the previous one. He quotes Adam Ferguson in his introduction and as he reminds us the final sentence of that quote must be borne in mind – “But every age hath its consolations, as well as its sufferings.”

He was correct to include that sentence because the lives of so many Scots, as he describes, appears to me as terrible. Even during lockdown, with no access to grandchildren, no football, restaurants and cafes closed, museums and art galleries closed I would not wish to swap places with the overworked, badly housed, short lived ‘ancestors’ in my country.

To be fair, his description of schooling post WWII, swing parks locked on Sundays and pubs closed on Sundays brings back childhood memories and one must ask oneself “how did it change yet again?”

Many of the general comments made about his previous book apply here. He lifts the carpet and examines what he finds. It is not pretty, nor is it complimentary. His portrayal of the Scots as a workforce, largely docile and kept in their place by their infighting and subjugation by the instruments of state is not one for the “Wha’s like us?” brigade.

He may be surprised at some changes – his comments on privatisation at the end of section 2 on p46 would come as a shock to those the Liberals push for municipalisation.

His description of the antipathy of some of the middle class to the poor housing is succinctly described in p 50 – 51. Little evidence of empathy or social do-gooding at that point.

The one area that I found him to be surprisingly positive was the issue of Irish Catholic immigration – he gives credit for the way in which large numbers were assimilated. He does not shy away from the prejudices, both personal and institutional, that were present; but he does acknowledge that efforts by some on both sides of the divide sought the pursuit of solutions to the problems.

His chapters on drink, sex, recreation and education did not fail to shatter myths – the difference between rural and urban practices were noteworthy. The contrast between the parish system at rural level and at urban level was well developed.

His final two chapters took on some of the myths about working class Scotland and, in particular, the failure of Scots (of all classes) to innovate in the great industries was also well developed.

There are some areas that I would have liked to have seen covered in greater detail.

I noted that on p 292 of my copy he comments on the neglect of the history of the family, child upbringing and the place of women within and without the home in the Further Reading section for Chapter VII.

This account, unlike his previous book, has little about Scottish Culture. The Glasgow Boys, the Scottish Colourists, the change in poetry brought about by McDiarmid etc. A very brief mention of music hall and cinema is given short discussion. Carol Craig in the Tears that made the Clyde describes how important the cinema was a meeting place and retreat for women in the Central Belt. This also comes across in Robert Douglas’s book – The Night Song of the Last Tram

The role of youth organisations to recreation – Boys Brigade, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides etc.

These two books have given me a lot to think about and have raised my enthusiasm to explore some of these areas further.

Ronnie Glavin, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2020