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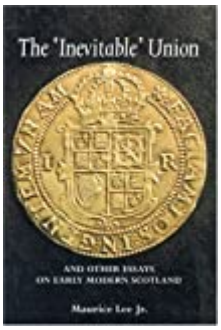

Maurice Lee, Jr. *The "Inevitable" Union and Other Essays on Early Modern Scotland.* East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2004. xvi + 285 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-86232-107-6.

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Not Taking the High Road

In the preface to this collection of essays, Maurice Lee–now retired–looks back fondly on his first book (*James Stewart, Earl of Moray*, published in 1953, yet still the standard reference work on its subject) and describes it as a "brash, young man's book" (p. 2). Lee may not be as young as he was, but the brashness is still there: perhaps mellowed a little into an engaging, chatty style which is not afraid to draw striking conclusions. Scottish history is not, after all, a field for fainthearts. This book contains ten articles published between 1956 and 1994, along with six substantive new pieces; all have something provocative to say.

Lee's fifty years of scholarship have been devoted to examining the European "century of crisis" (1560-1660, or thereabouts) from a Scottish point of view, and in the process dismissing the idea that the period was any such thing. Two essays in this collection attack that concept of a general crisis head-on. The earlier (and brasher) article argues that the Scottish crisis of the late 1630s, which sparked the wider British crisis, arose from local and contingent causes, and that therefore the whole international century of crisis has to be seen as a coincidence, a historians' construct. It is a view argued with gusto, but seems to beg the question; amongst other considerations, some of the factors informing the Scottish crisis (such as the problem of multiple kingdoms, the stubborn aspiration to impose religious uniformity and the relentless rise of military costs) were common to much of Europe. The second article on this theme is much better, and considers the trajectories of political change in the British Isles. Here, Lee's point is that Scotland in fact followed the wider European pattern–a trend towards settled, stable and absolutist government by the end of the period–and was only diverted from that path by the influence of the one major European state which bucked the trend, England.

This pre-occupation is one sign that Lee is a "splitter," not a "lumper": much of this book is spent happily skewering grand narratives with the deftness that arises from deep familiarity with one period. Indeed, one of the greatest strengths of these essays is the ease with which Lee moves through the period, drawing unexpected comparisons and pointing out links and phenomena that seem obvious once he has done so. The reign of the restored Charles II becomes Leviathan, a stable

and consensual absolutism, not an episode in the Convenanters' quixotic struggles. The 1707 Union only came about because a viable political structure was destroyed in 1689, yet nothing was put in its place by a Dutch king with no interest in his northern realm; this produced a polity so unmanageably chaotic that England was forced to absorb it. Lee also contributes invaluable essays on two great contemporary historians, Archbishop Spottiswoode and John Knox. For Knox, Lee argues, history was a sub-genre of preaching and prophecy, and his history needs to be read in those terms; and Spottiswoode's apparently sweet reasonableness should not be allowed to obscure the subtle biases of his Anglican agenda. Indeed, as so often in Scottish political discourse, reasonableness itself is a controversial stance.

At the other end of the period, the dilemmas of Sir Richard Maitland of Lethington, a reluctant but sincere convert at the Reformation, suggest that national conversion was a messy business, which Knox and his allies hijacked rather than led. And Mary Stewart should not be thought of as Mary, Queen of Scots, but as Marie de France, a Frenchwoman through and through, who had no interest in the country of her birth: "being affable is not the same thing as having a policy" (p. 43). Lee suggests that this was at the root of her troubles, but the comparison with her mother–another Frenchwoman ruling Scotland, but one who did have a clear policy, and came to grief partly because of it–suggests that there are worse political vices than mere affability.

This sparky, lively book has the problems that are inevitable in such a collection. Some of the older essays are not flattered by being placed alongside more recent pieces. There is also a fair degree of repetition, as Lee criss-crosses his territory. His fondness for narrative exacerbates that problem, as stories are retold, and those with more austere tastes may feel that such demotic techniques are undignified. In fact, Lee's career-long readiness to use narrative as an explanatory device not only makes his work readable, but also gives his arguments much of their power. Never forgetting that history is one damn thing after another, he has been able to piece together plausible accounts of complex events (such as Charles II's miserable year in Scotland in 1650-51), and to use grounded narrative complexity of that kind to spot the flaws in grand theories.

Lee begins this book by insisting that he sees himself as an American, not a Scots-American; but perhaps long exposure to Scottish history has had its effect on him. A sparky, awkward commentator, taking delight in pointing out inconvenient connections and in rewriting myths, skeptical of high roads whether to England or elsewhere: that sounds like a Scotsman to me.

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