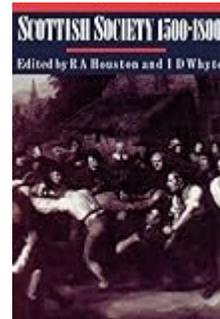


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Robert Allen Houston, Ian D. Whyte. *Scottish Society 1500-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 310 S. \$32.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-89167-7.



Reviewed by Christopher Harvie (_Seminar fuer Englische Philologie_, University of Tuebingen)

Published on H-Albion (October, 2006)

Edwin Muir's "Scotland 1941" (1941) saw little good in his country's transformation.

"A simple sky roofed in that rustic day, / The busy corn-fields and the haunted holms, / The green road winding up the ferny brae, / But Knox and Melville clapped their preaching palms / And bundled all the harvesters away. / Hoodicrow Peden in the blighted corn / Hacked with his rusty beak the starving haulms. / Out of that desolation we were born."

Muir was writing after twenty years of devastating depression, which followed the overstretch of the Scottish heavy industries in World War I (when they probably saved Britain), something that seemed to cast the whole modernization process in question.

Semi-autonomy, the rebirth of Scottish politics and the cockiness of neo-classical economics have changed matters since R. A. B. Houston and I. D. Whyte's symposium first came out in 1989, twenty years after T. C. Smout's *History of the Scottish People*, ground-breaking in its combination of social and cultural analysis, and at a time when Scottish historical studies were reviving almost as a sort of national service after the setback to autonomy in the referendum of 1979. *Scottish Society, 1500-1800* is welcome as a reprint, a heavyweight contribution about a key historical period, but it also raises the less

hopeful question of where Scottish history has gone since then.

The subject of the eleven authors was the "body" of the nation in the three centuries that bridged the Reformation of 1560, the regnal union of 1603 and the parliamentary union of 1707. Early modern Scotland? Not really, because the final fifty-five years, from the last Jacobite rebellion's disastrous end on Culloden Moor to the Anglo-Irish Union and first British Census, would see the little, remote country rival France and Germany, and out-class England, as a center of science and philosophy.

In the useful comparative study that concludes the book, the Englishman Keith Wrightson identifies "exceptionalists" and "integrators" as the two main drivers in Scots historiography: if the latter predominate in the book, this is largely because the framework that governed industrialization was *faut de mieux* British. Trying to identify the Scottish component in British "modernization" made them equivalent to the "revisionists" who were currently convulsing Irish historical studies. Re-reading Houston and Whyte, however, suggests a modulation which bears out the thrust of Muir's gloomy poem: that Scottish exceptionalism in the shape of the protestant ethic in fact enforced integration—while an even more English establishment (Wrightson cites a 1987 essay "British History: Past, Present and Future" by David

Cannadine) remained unwilling or incapable of diagnosing its own exceptionalism.

“Eat First, Then Reason” might be a good subtitle to Alex Gibson and Christopher Smout’s essay on “Scottish Food and Scottish History.” It is, in Bertolt Brecht’s sense, crucial. They calculate that the Scottish people moved from a late medieval meat-and-fish diet to an ever-increasing reliance on cheaper cereals and later potatoes, though without any great decline in the calories consumed. The meat and fish were still produced, though overwhelmingly for export, the profits returning to provide some infrastructural and commercial capital, and more goods and services for the well-doing. Take the food trade as the basic implement, and the other components of this collective discourse make sense.

Michael Lynch shows a powerful urban identity in early modern Scotland (at a time when urbanization in Wales was minimal and in Ireland alien) which integrated itself with its locality rather than expanded. Tom Devine on “The Highland and Lowland Clearances” may over-stress his intra-Scottish parallels. The re-ordering of lowland farming in the direction of proto-industrialization, with former small tenants either moving to growing towns or resettling in planned villages, was not the same as the desolation of whole regions and wholesale militarization, as in the north—though the existence of this “reserve army of the unemployed” must certainly have curbed living standards and expectations in the south and (as Houston shows) among the female half of the population, diverting cash to boost capital investment. Whyte’s own study of social mobility shows it broadly comparable with that of England—itself pretty remarkable given lower living standards across the board.

Rosalind Mitchison, on the Scottish Poor Law, supplements Devine by concentrating on the way in which the “Godly Commonwealth” of the Kirk Sessions sought to keep the poor, who had no statutory right to able-bodied relief, under the thumb of local élites. This lasted long enough to facilitate population redistribution on a much bolder scale than Speenhamland England, though élite control was by 1800 being subverted by the rapid development of commercialized agriculture and proto-industrialization, particularly in the more pros-

perous South. (Devine has shown, in *The Scottish Nation* [1999], that eighteenth-century Scottish urbanization was the most rapid in Europe.[2]) Louis Cullen on Scotland and Ireland sees the payoff in the greater acceptance given to Scots professionals in England and the use of patronage and empire to consolidate the Union, while Ireland’s steeper gradient between its Protestant winners and Catholic losers increased its relative isolation.

The eighteenth century ended with two blood-baths; but the Highland soldiers died abroad, an under-remembered factor in the imperial multiplier, while “Ninety-Eight” and its long-remembered atrocities would scar the lamentable 122-year career of the Anglo-Irish union. Cumulatively, Houston and Whyte’s contributors suggest that Scots tranquillity after 1746 depended on the micromanagement of change by a complex and flexible elite, its power based on social control, investment in social overhead capital, particularly in education and transport, the upward redistribution of wealth, and all-pervasive patronage.

The symposium is throughout well referenced and the index comprehensive: the only real gap is the neglect of urban history in the eighteenth century, in which the rectangular grids of the improvers left their mark, itself to be overprinted by mine, spoil-tip, railway and slum. It still stands pretty well on its own, without the need for a further, updating introduction, largely because the tide of British socioeconomic history has ebbed, while in the subsequent decade market pressures have meant that more Scottish effort has been put into general histories and symposia, particularly about the Enlightenment, and into the revival of political history. The three chapters which cover this period in a recent multi-authored *Scotland: A History* (2005), edited by Jenny Wormald, Roger Mason, and Richard Sher, are at best only marginally concerned with “the people below”: an odd and somehow disconcerting reversal.

Note

[1]. See Irene Maver, “Review of T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation: A History 1700-2000*,” H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, May, 2000 (<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=21333957377847>).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Christopher Harvie. Review of Houston, Robert Allen; Whyte, Ian D., *Scottish Society 1500-1800*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. October, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12360>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.