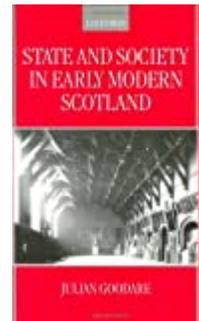




Julian Goodare. *State and Society in Early Modern Scotland.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. xviii + 366 pp. 00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820762-7.



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Absolutism's New Clothes

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Julian Goodare may know more than anyone else currently publishing about the institutions of Scotland's government in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This book builds on his 1989 Edinburgh University Ph.D. thesis "Parliament and Society in Scotland, 1560-1603" and a great deal of work that he has done since then. In his published works thus far (mostly articles—this is his first book) he has rescued the late sixteenth/early seventeenth-century Scots Parliament from oblivion, arguing for its vitality and institutional importance in the face of traditional scholarship which has treated it as an easily manipulated tool of factions. He has also tested the applicability of the concept of absolutism to the early modern Scottish state, and found it useful in describing, among other things, the relationship between the crown and the nobility.

Here, his brief is to place Scotland in the context of the rise of the sovereign state and the failure of multinational empires within Europe, a major aspect of what E.L. Jones called "the European miracle"—the historical contingencies which carried Europe to eventual world

dominance. At first blush, his stated time frame of 1560-1625 (p. 5) seems rather narrow for such an ambitious undertaking, but in truth he wanders back into the late medieval period and forward to the Union of 1707, while drawing the bulk of his material from the reign of James VI. After introductory chapters on the concept of sovereignty, lordship and absolutism, Goodare proceeds thematically, with chapters devoted to finance, warfare, religion, territory, the Borders and Highlands, and the catch-all "State Power," before wrapping up with a chapter titled "Perspectives on State Formation." There is a lot of overlap between chapters, although in the central section of the book the organizational scheme holds up fairly well.

Historians who see "absolutism" as both conceptually vague and prone to exaggeration that papers over too many irregularities (a sort of early modern equivalent to beleaguered "feudalism") will be troubled by Goodare's use of the term. He is certainly aware of the objections to its use, and skirts them by usefully insisting that absolutism must be seen as a *process* rather than a final state of affairs. He confronts objections to the concept raised (in

the French context) by David Parker and Roger Mettam by granting that there were plenty of continuities with late medieval kingship, but nevertheless, after 1580, the Scottish state “became a dynamo, energetically reshaping the law in a more centralized and integrated framework” (p. 97). For Goodare, the decline of the bloodfeud under royal pressure is an example of this. Lordship and clientage continued, but they were grafted into administration, rather than staffing private warfare. The crown sought to keep the nobility on board by using customs duties rather than a land tax to raise money, while the royal court became “a soup kitchen for the nobility” (p. 80). Like all newer invocations of the term, Goodare’s absolutism requires a wealthy, happy nobility.

Goodare certainly deserves credit for his willingness to depart from conventional wisdom. Finding absolutist tendencies in a state which was not experiencing a military revolution by any measure is one such instance. Pre-Covenant Scotland never had much of an army, and it was a struggle just to maintain the king’s guard. But rather than avoiding this subject, Goodare devotes an entire chapter to warfare, although the reader might be forgiven for doubting the usefulness of an estimate which places the “notional” national army at between 1,000 and 140,000 men in the sixteenth century (p. 140).

Goodare does a good job of tracing the development of royal supremacy over the Kirk, through the Negative Confession (1581), the Black Acts (1584), and the Golden Act (1592). For Goodare, the latter may have produced a Kirk that was clearly presbyterian, but the royal supremacy remained, despite retrospective claims made

by partisans such as James Melville. Likewise, he shows common sense in his refusal to see problems in Highland administration after 1580 as signs of a weak government. Goodare points out that the crown had shown little interest in the Highlands in the first three quarters of the sixteenth century. The “Highland problem” only became possible after the state sought to intervene there.

The most interesting parts of this book may be those which trace developments in the 1630s and after. In these, Goodare offers much less detail, but a greater willingness to look at the big picture. In this account, the nobility were the biggest victims of the covenanting period, and their political and economic emasculation makes the term “absolutism” inappropriate after 1660. Scotland and England were clearly growing together in many ways. Goodare sees a “convergence in state structure—ideological, economic and military” between the two in the seventeenth century which made Scotland more “digestible” in 1707 (p. 338). Ironically (although Goodare does not refer to this), New Labour’s strategy of devolution in Scotland, Wales, and the regions of England suggests a new convergence (pushed from the center) which may make Scotland more easily coughed up.

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