

H-Net Reviews

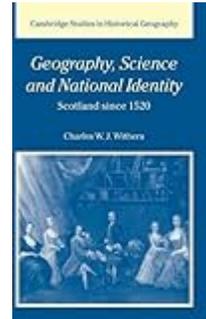
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Michael Lynch, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 732 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-211696-3.



Charles W.J. Withers. *Geography, Science and National Identity: Scotland since 1520*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 312 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-64202-6.



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History has always been with us, but geography seemed to be an enlightenment discipline, in which the physical sciences parlayed with statistics and statecraft. Unsurprisingly, Scotland was perhaps its central breeding-ground. The systematic mapping of Scotland—and with it the foundation of the Ordnance Survey—began in the aftermath of the 1745-6 Jacobite rising, when James Hutton, the father of geology, was a young man. His *Theory of the Earth* came out in Edinburgh in 1785, just before Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster planned the *Statistical Account of Scotland*, compiled to a predetermined program by Scotland's 938 parishes, to be published throughout the 1790s, and repeated more elaborately in the 1830s.

Subsequently, many of the most imaginative insights into Scots identity have come through geography, and Professor Charles Withers, as an English-born scholar of Scottish cultural life, has furthered these in a demanding but remarkable monograph, by looking at the roots of the eighteenth century's developments in the renaissance, with the first Scottish maps devised by the Rev. Timothy Pont between 1583 and 1596, and at Stewart attempts—as a means of fulfilling the prospectus of their “Great Britain”—at institutionalizing the discipline, in universities, schools and societies. Pioneers like Sir Robert Sibbald, Scotland's first Geographer-Royal, with his friends Andrew Balfour and Robert Wodrow (the great chronicler of the Covenanters) had the profession in hand in Newton's day, with the germ already present of a *Sta-*

tistical Account project. Withers meticulously plots the spatial development of the discipline, concentrated naturally enough in the capital, but also diffused through burgh schools, local associations, and gentry *savants*. They would later be joined by such commercial firms as the great Edinburgh map-making houses founded by John Bartholomew and Keith Johnston, and by the end of the nineteenth century the discipline would be broadcast worldwide by a Scottish European, the profligate genius Professor Patrick Geddes.

Geography, Science and National Identity was read after I had finished my *Scotland: a Short History*, which would have benefitted from its concepts and detailed documentation.[1] As a contribution to the analysis of nationality it is scarcely less important than George Davie's *The Democratic Intellect* (1961). The result differs from the conclusions of conventional history, but effectively explains the manufacture of the Scottish nation from disparate components, and the integration into it of regions hitherto regarded as alien: proximate territories first, and then a world made—for a time—to serve Scottish purposes. Whether Withers can end optimistically is another matter. The late twentieth century saw immense pressure on Scotland's professional geographic resources through North Sea oil, but also saw the takeover of the big commercial firms, and perhaps the diversion into politics of the sort of intellectual effort that the profession required.

In terms of popular culture, we have otherwise gone from M'Choakumchild and "the water sheds of the world" (Dickens' sarcastic comment on Scots geography in *Hard Times*, unremarked upon by Withers), to Sam Cooke's "Don't know much about geography." The words of the anatomist, Professor Alexander Munro to his daughter in 1739—after outlining a geography course for her—ring all too true against the vacuity of today's student and "yoof" culture: "I ... must give you the Caution never to discover this part of your Knowledge to your female acquaintances or the ignorant foplings of my Sex, for they will fix the name of Virtuosi, Pedant and I don't know what on you" (Withers, p. 125).

To take one's eye off such developments, in the computer age, could have fateful consequences. Many of which, alas, are on show in the *Oxford Companion to Scottish History*. The problem with Michael Lynch's book is not the quality of the content: many of the essays are excellent brief treatments of their themes, with the results of original research on display. The editors of the individual sections (the general editor takes on early modern Scotland), Dauvit Broun (medieval history),

Ewan Cameron (the Highlands), Richard Finlay (the modern period), Joan MacDonald (Gaelic Scotland), Margaret MacKay (Ethnology), Duncan Macmillan (the arts), and Geoffrey Stell (material culture) have done an admirable job in commissioning articles, which reflect new preoccupations and reconsiderations. But there are gaps, some of them inexplicable. Look for the population of the country, or of counties and cities, in any tabulated way, and you will be disappointed. The absence of any detailed subject-specific maps or graphs means that showing, say, the process of enclosure, the turnpiking of roads or the expansion of the railway system, is awkward. Even in an article on transport which has much valuable technical information, by the doyen of Scots industrial archaeologists, John Hume, there is no mention of the five Scottish railway companies, how extensive their networks were, when they were "grouped" under English management (1923), when nationalized (1947), or when privatized (1997).

But dwarfing these shortcomings is a structure of information retrieval which, to a bear of little organizational brain like the present writer, is monumentally dysfunctional. A "Note to the Reader" (p. xxiv) sets out the principles of the layout: "The reader may take any one of four routes to find information: by headword; through the structural, thematic spine of the volume which is revealed in the Classified Contents; by cross-references within headword entries; or via the index."

So far so good. But when one turns back to the "Classified Contents" one is confronted with categories such as "Events" under which fall "1100-1150" including the subjects "Great Cause" and "Independence, Wars of"; or, "1500-1770s" which contains "Congregation, Wars of," "Covenant, Wars of the," "Covenanters," "Jacobitism," "National Covenant and Solemn League and Covenant." Where do you look for what was happening before 1100 or between 1150 and 1500? How do you distinguish between the various Covenants, if you're not an expert? Then, looking in the index, you find that the entries in the "Classified Contents" are not inserted there. You get Archibald Johnston of Warriston, but not Tom Johnston, the great World War II Secretary of State. If you *do* find a helpful index entry, you have to refer back to pp. xvi-xxi in order to match it.

Test-driving the *Companion* did not reassure. I used it to check background material for a paper on Hugh Miller (1802-56): geologist, folklorist, non-intrusionist and editor of the *Witness*, one of the dozen greatest Victorian Scots (though, oddly, a non-presence in Withers).

I turned to the index. There was a reference to Miller in “Culture 17: age of industry (1814-1914): general,” and ten column lines on him. But I had to go back to the Classified Contents to find “geology.” The index entry “Folklore” took me to “Highlands and Islands” but it was back to Classified Contents for “newspapers” (very short and uninformative) while “Disruption,” found in the same way—after I had drawn a blank on “non-intrusion” in the index—was more about patronage than the founding of the Free Kirk. None of these had any mention of Miller.

This happened in a book which has “Religion” pretty well represented, with about thirty pages of main-line articles. Thinking of its contemporary polar opposite sent me after “Drugs.” The nearest I got was “Diet” and that ended about 1800, and while Richard Finlay’s useful entry on living standards referred to Victorian Scotland’s horrendous spirits intake, he did not get near to the *Trainspotting* generation, and the current 56,000 addicts.

It is as if the *Companion* was conceived in the age of the Paleointernet, when the first search engines were

constructed: the ones which opened up large general categories but had to be asked to particularize. This was the theory, at any rate; the actuality was, as I found when I once typed “Millenium Celebrations” into Altavista or some such, I was rewarded with an avalanche of Mid-Western end-of-the-world craziness. Other enquiries did not go anywhere at all. The moral is that the approach ought to be systematically alphabetical, or that the index ought to be very good. Search engines have improved spectacularly, to the point that I’ve developed an almost ingenuous dependence on Google, because it seems to have built into it a Frequently-Asked-Questions approach. Would it be too much to ask Lynch and Oxford University Press to dismantle the *Companion* and rebuild it round a retrieval system amalgamating best practice on the net with the portability of the book?

Note

[1]. [ed. note: reviewed H-Albion, October 2002, <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=223741035847371>].

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

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

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