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[Book Review] Remembering the Past in Nineteenth-Century Scotland: Commemoration, Nationality and Memory

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James. J. Coleman, *Remembering the Past in Nineteenth-Century Scotland: Commemoration, Nationality and Memory* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014. Pp. 204; ISBN 0748676902, £65.00) DOI: 10.3366/jshs.2015.0160

Thanks to the likes of Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, the concept of cultural memory has become a valuable means of investigating how people understand their relationships with the past. The collective remembrance of historical events and characters can reveal much about how particular groups position themselves as the inheritors of history. As scholars from Ernest Renan onwards have argued, a constructively myopic view of the past is vital for the creation of national identities.

James Coleman uses this approach to explore the contested question of Scottish identity during the nineteenth century. These are choppy historiographical waters. Historians including George Davie, Henry Hanham, Tom Nairn, Marinell Ash, and Colin Kidd have argued that many Scots in this era lacked faith in their own national history. Instead they lionized the English past as an explanation for Scotland's current happy state within the union. However scholars such as David McCrone, Richard Finlay, and Graeme Morton have disputed this interpretation, instead citing evidence for a sense of historically-based self that embraced union but was at the same time assertively Scottish. Coleman brings a fresh perspective to bear on this issue by looking at acts of historical commemoration, rather than the written histories and antiquarian institutions which have until now tended to form the focus of research in this area. Not only is this an unexplored avenue, but it provides access to the views of a significantly broader cross-section of Scottish society.

Coleman offers a detailed investigation of commemorative activity relating to William Wallace, John Knox, the Covenanters, and the Stuart dynasty. He starts by juxtaposing the ideologically-neutered interpretations of Sir Walter Scott against the politically-charged visions of leading Presbyterians. In so doing, he demonstrates that Scotland's history was judged on its perceived contribution to the development of liberty across Britain. Scott and his disciples located the master-narrative of British progress within English history. In contrast, many Presbyterians saw Knox and the Covenanters as central to the development of religious and civil liberty not only in Scotland but in Britain as a whole. Coleman then suggests that Wallace was able to bridge that divide. Admittedly the circumstances surrounding the construction of the National Monument at Stirling reveal conflict between those who supported the union in its current state and those who sought to re-shape it along more equitable lines; however Wallace's supposed low birth, his martyrdom at the hands of Edward I, and his defence of national independence rendered him a unifying symbol whose contribution to the progress of liberty was recognised by all Scots. Had he not defeated English advances in the fourteenth century, there would have been no independent Scotland to enter into a mutually beneficial union in 1707.

According to Coleman, Knox was a more divisive figure. He united the Presbyterian majority and was commemorated on a national level in a way that Wallace and Bruce were not. But he also received stiff criticism from Episcopalians and the Presbyterian claim that he had delivered religious liberty to the subsequent union proved hard for many to swallow. Nonetheless, the widespread commemoration of Knox suggests a close correlation between confessional adherence and national identity throughout the century. The

Covenanters were a more problematic element of the national past. Initially they were seen as extremists whose violent behaviour and disregard for law could not be justified. As the century wore on, however, they were increasingly portrayed as defenders of the Presbyterian faith and champions of a religious liberty that was ultimately secured at the Glorious Revolution. Coleman argues that this change was symptomatic of a newly confident sense of nationality that was religious in character and operated within a unionist landscape. Yet he reaches different conclusions about attitudes to the Stuart dynasty. Catholic Mary and her descendent Bonnie Prince Charlie were a poor fit for a story of Scottish nationality that was bound up with the achievements of a Protestant union. Acts of remembrance for the Stuarts consequently disavowed any political significance and were instead justified on antiquarian grounds alone. Indeed in the case of the '45 it was the virtues of Highland Scots, rather than the Stuart cause they supposedly fought for, that received the bulk of the attention.

Coleman successfully demonstrates that the overriding historical narrative of nineteenth-century Scottishness was providential union. Aspects of Scotland's past were judged on their contribution to the union, and the extent and form of commemoration flowed from that. But against that unionist backdrop, historically-aware articulations of Scottish nationality grew more powerful as the century wore on. In this way Coleman challenges received wisdom about the weakness of Scottish identity in this period. He does an excellent job of showing how popular understandings of the national past can provide insights into shared ideas about collective identity. The great strength of his book is its ability to translate the detail of monument-building and anniversary celebrations into convincing conclusions about how those involved understood their own identity as Scots.

There are always things about which to nit-pick. The secondary literature is not always up-to-date; some important texts are missing and an over-reliance on Hanham, whose work is almost fifty years old, is particularly notable. The book would also benefit from fuller engagement with wider debates. How do its conclusions relate to recent research into the civic nature of Scottish identity and the Celtic-Teutonic divide? Where do the examples of cultural memory that Coleman examines sit within an ideological landscape shaped by a romantic regard for the past on its own terms as well as Enlightenment ideas about societal progress? How does his analysis of commemoration relate to work already done on the relationship between nationality and history-writing in this era?

Nevertheless, Coleman has done what he set out to do. By researching a hitherto uncharted area of study, he has added an important strand to the debate about Scottish nationality in the nineteenth century. He has also dealt another blow to long-standing assumptions about the infirmity of Scottish national identity in this pivotal period.

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