



BOOK REVIEW

Richard Finlay. *Scottish Nationalism: History, Ideology and the Question of Independence*

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Richard Finlay deserves an accolade few Scottish historians can claim; because of his dominance in the study of twentieth-century Scottish nationalism, he has been the reason that generations of undergraduates have learned the use of abbreviations such as *ibid.* and *op. cit.* This book will only strengthen that tendency and tutors will, more than ever, struggle to name a better historian of this subject.

Finlay's expertise in the history of Scottish nationalism, however, is both this book's strength and its weakness. Familiarity has certainly not bred contempt on the part of the author whose own political sympathies are relatively easy to deduce. But it has, at times, encouraged a less than exacting approach to evidence (particularly quotation); a habit of jumping across chronological periods (frustrating for the unwary reader); a tendency to assert (rather than prove); and inconsistent presumptions about the prior knowledge of the target readership who, one suspects, Finlay (quite understandably) may assume have read him before. One can thus readily appreciate the origins of the weaknesses one finds here. The question is whether the book adds a new dimension, re-visions past perspectives, re-frames old questions. This is certainly what Finlay sets out to do.

The book (beautifully produced by Bloomsbury Academic) is structured along thematic lines: five chapters addressing history, nationalism, constitutionalism, unionism, and ideology sequence an argument that seeks distance from traditional chronological approaches and at times reads the nationalist story against the grain of transitory political change. To do this convincingly necessitates an approach to Scottish nationalism that presumes a core set of values which are consistent if not unchanging. But what are they? Finlay at times aggregates these and refers (it seems interchangeably) to nationalist "ideology," or nationalist "philosophy," or the "philosophical kernel of Scottish nationalism" (2). It is principally in the introduction that this approach is explained. For this reviewer at least, it does not satisfy, or at the very least generates confusion and frustration as one seeks to reconcile a variety of assertions that individually seem convincing but together are contradictory. An example: Finlay asserts that "Scottish independence is a policy, not an ideology" (3), but goes on to identify "a coherent body of ideas – or ideology – around which the quest for Scottish independence was formed," which he refers to as a "philosophical core" (4) and later as "the intellectual foundations" (7) of nationalism. Whether one agrees with Finlay that the intellectual apparatus sustaining a nationalist political party emerged in the fifty years following the end of the Great War, one has to ask whether this amounts to an ideology, a philosophy, and a policy, or indeed if anything can ever be all three. On one level, this might be considered semantics, but if the major contribution of this book to the study of nationalism is its

foregrounding of its intellectual history, then these basics have to convince and the evidence must align with them. One has to be persuaded that there is something in the corpus of colourful illustrative quotations grounding this study that points to something more than the sum of their parts. Extracts from nationalist journals spread across decades, often unattributed and devoid of context, do not in themselves an ideology make.

The frames imposed by the thematic focus of each of the core chapters go some way to addressing this. Finlay's treatment of the historiographical legacy of the past is thought-provoking, particularly his identification of Irish comparators and competing historical schools of thought in nationalist groups (e.g. Celticists, devolutionists, etc.). The chapter on nationalism wisely begins with Scottish nationalists' equivocation on their relationship with other European movements and highlights the nationalisms they embraced and eschewed (sometimes simultaneously). While fascinating, it does not get us any closer to a stable philosophical understanding of Scottish nationalism; indeed, it only serves to prove its contingent status. Similarly, the chapter on constitutionalism offers nourishing food for thought. Finlay, like other writers on this topic, asserts the significance of popular sovereignty arguments even among those nationalists and unionists who used the specific terms of the Union settlement to hold various governments to account. Beliefs in both popular and parliamentary sovereignty were not incompatible it seems. But which (if either) was simply a political tactic and which the goal? After all, the aim of most was a Scottish parliament, not a diffused commonwealth; an assembly, not anarchy. Bringing together questions of sovereignty, civil society, the legal system, and the Union makes sense, and it works here at least historically (the chapter covers the best part of a hundred years). But by demonstrating that the answers generated by nationalists did not always cohere, shifted over time, and were regularly contradictory again serves to undermine the idea that what we are dealing with goes beyond simple political opportunism.

One wonders if the historical narrative style adopted by Finlay is best suited to his aim to reframe the development of nationalism in philosophical terms. One waits for the unambiguous Q.E.D. moment that histories can seldom deliver. And yet, Finlay's objective is worthwhile. The Labour hegemony in Scottish politics along with the party's unionist presumptions, which lasted much of the twentieth century, became, in Colin Kidd's words in *Union and Unionism* (2008), "banal" (23), and generated a lazy historiography at times. The rise of the SNP in the twenty-first century promises to do the same, by either encouraging the re-writing of Labour's past as its own, or simply adding to various victimologies the 2014 Referendum as (yet another) wrong to be righted (yet another) so-called Scottish defeat to be revenged. Anything that takes analyses of Scottish politics, past and present, beyond that is to be welcomed.