

# H-Net Reviews

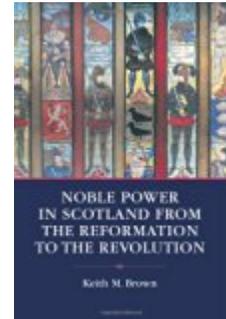
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Keith M. Brown. *Noble Power in Scotland from the Reformation to the Revolution*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. ix + 334 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-1298-7.

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Published on H-Albion (November, 2012)

Commissioned by Brendan Kane



In this companion volume to *Noble Society in Scotland* (2000), Keith M. Brown emphasizes the roles of various power players in the early modern Scottish world. While *Noble Society* focuses on elements of the lives of nobility, who were generally seen to hold power absolutely, *Noble Power* provides a new perspective, concentrating not only on the courtiers, lords, and chiefs, but also on the magistrates, soldiers, and governors who vied for power. Brown bookends his evaluation of these roles with two assessments of noble power, beginning the book with a study of politics between 1560 and 1603 and wrapping up the study with an examination of politics in the later period, between 1603 and 1637. Such a structure indicates that the nobles of this period were living in a dynamic political environment.

As much as the social institutions described by Brown were similar throughout this period, the political environment was in flux. Noblemen struggled for power at court, and their real power was measured in the number of noble and lairdly followers they could raise to support their causes. Popular support and assistance from neighboring families could supplement this power, but a lack of regional support could cause a situation to quickly turn sour. These interactions demonstrate the limitations of royal authority in the noble world. Blood feud proved a thorn in the side of the monarchs, and its elimination was a pet cause of James VI. It is clear that the political context of this period was one of upheaval.

Brown's first thematic chapter, "Chief," centers on kinship. Much of this chapter relies on recent scholarship on the dynamics of the kin networks in early modern Scotland, such as Alison Cathcart's evaluation of kinship structures in Clan Chattan. Brown uses these case

studies to discuss the impact of kinship on lordship and nobility and notes that there may be differences between highland and lowland families, but that in every case kin groups struggled to maintain a balance between agnatic kindreds and central authority. These extended families could expand over generations and through noble marriage, but ultimately the strength of these bonds was measured by the amount of martial and political support that these men provided when summoned.

Brown emphasizes that perceptions of good lordship were uniform throughout this period. Sound judgment and fulfillment of obligations were two qualities that were considered paramount to success. Noblemen had clear obligations to the monarch, but they also experienced interdependence with other nobles who formed the fabric of their society. Friendship and kinship were two ways in which these bonds manifested.

Nobles held formal roles as well. The "pronounced legal culture" included nobles, presiding over their own local courts and fulfilling duties as magistrates (p. 89). These men were still subject to the supervision of the Court of Session. Brown describes systems of law that were increasingly complex, and notes that nobles were not always interested in keeping up with these legal developments. In particular, the Borders posed a special challenge, and the presence of magistrates keeping peace in this region has been thoroughly explored by Anna Groundwater.

Brown limits his conclusions to the lives of noblemen; noblewomen make only the occasional appearance. The titles of the chapters themselves, such as "Chief," "Magistrate," and "Lord," categorically exclude women from most of the discussion. This ignores a large amount of

recent scholarship on the roles of women in noble society. Although formal appointments were most often held by men, women did play crucial roles in noble networks of power, and this aspect of noble power is missing from this book. There are exceptions to this pattern. Women exercising atypical authority, such as Mary Queen of Scots, make frequent appearances, but the typical lives of noblewomen do not appear in this sketch of noble power. Brown does mention questions of maternal kinship and events surrounding royal women, but these play a minor role. Brown's first volume, *Noble Society*, covered such topics as wealth, family, and culture, and this volume diverges from that model to discuss the lives of noblemen. The structures of society and power intermingle, and the roles of women in creating and maintaining power were significant in the world of the nobility.

Overall, this is a valuable contribution to the study of early modern Scottish politics. Brown's conclusions rely on a great deal of anecdotal evidence, and the author does not include the rich numeric evidence that appeared in his earlier volume. He does, however, address many aspects of noble life in greater detail. For instance, his treatment of kinship fills a major gap in his earlier description of the Scottish family in *Noble Society*.

Although a greater emphasis on the connections between "noble society" and "noble power" would add much to this discussion, this volume still provides substantial coverage of the history of nobility in Scotland. *Noble Power's* focus is on power in practice, and Brown's conclusions about how nobles exercised and maintained power are invaluable.

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**Citation:** Heather Parker. Review of Brown, Keith M., *Noble Power in Scotland from the Reformation to the Revolution*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.

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