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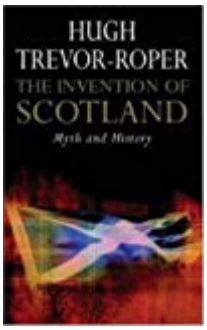

Hugh Trevor-Roper. *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History.* Edited by Jeremy J. Cater. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. xxi + 282 pp $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-13686-9.

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Commissioned by Margaret McGlynn (University of Western Ontario)

The figure of Hugh Trevor-Roper, in later life Lord Dacre, looms large over the historiography of early modern England and Europe. His influential essays and book-length studies remain essential reading material in many postgraduate history programs, in some instances more than fifty years after their appearance in print. Trevor-Roper's reach was, moreover, broad and eclectic: notwithstanding the damaging consequences of his confidence in the authenticity of the so-called Hitler diaries, he also succeeded in forging a name for himself in the field of twentieth-century European history. He is perhaps less well known as an authority on the Scottish past, but as Jeremy J. Cater, the editor of this posthumous collection of essays, reminds his readers here, in the later 1970s he played an important role in shaping scholarly debate on the antecedents of the Scottish Enlightenment. According to Cater, Trevor-Roper always intended to publish this collection of conference presentations, journal articles, and editorial pieces as a single volume; that he failed to do so was an accident of circumstance.[1]

Cater's efforts to assemble a fair copy of several manuscripts at various stages of completion lend the book a greater coherence than Trevor-Roper was able to bestow on it, but in most respects the latter's authorship is readily apparent in its pages. In typically ambitious fashion, Trevor-Roper set out to explore, then to explode, a series of three great myths that, he claimed, colored the Scots' interpretation of their own history from the Middle Ages right down to the end of the nineteenth century. These included a political myth that endowed the kingdom and its people with a distinct history within the British polity; a literary myth centered on the fabled (if entirely imaginary) Gaelic poet Ossian; and a sartorial myth, the focus of which was the tartan kilt. Evidence of Trevor-Roper's famous skill as an essayist appears in his exquisite use of language and his strengths as a synthetist in his ability to draw a straight line between events as widely separated in time as the settlement of the Scots in Dál Riata in the fifth century and the publication, more than a thousand years later, of Hector Boece's

monumental *History of the Scots*. His acerbic wit finds ready expression in allusions to the failed poet and renegade adventurer, James Macpherson, and the classical Greek figure of Nausica as, respectively, a "Highland booby" and a princess "washing knickers in the river," as well as in his reference to Scottish supporters of the Protestant faith as members of a "Calvinist International" (pp. 92, 103, 42). His sense of the past as a series of contingent events serves as a framework by which to disentangle the strands of the social and intellectual circles that drew merchants, bankers, highland ruffians, and honest scholars into each other's circles in London and Edinburgh. Finally, Trevor-Roper's oft-criticized approach to questions of historical causation underlies the suspiciously neat chronology that he constructs for each of the three great myths which successively informed and underpinned the Scots' view of their history. The first, he posits, was triggered by the sudden death in 1286 of King Alexander III, the last of the direct descendants of Kenneth MacAlpin. It was conceived in response to Edward I's attempts to subjugate the realm and endured until the early eighteenth century. The second, literary, myth was born of the Scots' need to replace the distinct political and historical identity that they lost as a consequence of the Union of 1707; and the third, the myth of kilts and tartans, post dated the defeat of the highland clans on the field of Culloden, and later helped to reconcile the Scots to Hanoverian rule.

There is much in this volume to incite discussion and debate, even thirty-five years down the road. Although Trevor-Roper drew heavily on the published work of other scholars in the construction of his arguments (perhaps most notably in his discussions of influences on the work of John of Fordun and later medieval continuator, Walter Bower), he identified a handful of questions to which scholars have recently turned new attention. His comments on the close links between Irish and Scottish ballad traditions, for example, anticipated the important work of Wilson McLeod on this very subject (***Divided Gaels: Gaelic Cultural Identities in Scotland and Ireland c.1200-c.1650*** [2004]); similarly, his musings about the authenticity of the Saint Andrews chronicler, Veremundus, are of much relevance to the groundbreaking work of Dauvit Broun on the medieval origins of the Scottish foundation legend (***Scottish Independence and the Idea of Britain: From the Picts to Alexander III*** [2007]).

Underneath Trevor-Roper's clever writing, however, there lurks an arrogance that is not so blatant in his other scholarly endeavors. To each of the three periods he assigns a series of buffoon-like champions, including, notably, the historians John of Fordun (d. c.1384), Hector Boece (d. 1536), and George Buchanan (d. 1582); the poet James Macpherson; and the tartan enthusiasts John and Charles Allen, together with a matching set of enlightened critics. The former are universally Scots. Each was invariably deluded. Each was stubbornly unwilling to see that his naïve faith in a Scottish past was nourished and sustained on manuscripts that were blatant forgeries; in each of these cases, by contrast, English scholars were canny enough to detect the deceit almost from the outset. Boece's trust in a lost manuscript of a thirteenth-century Saint Andrews chronicler, for example, allows Trevor-Roper to portray him as only slightly less foolish than Buchanan, who apparently knew that Boece's history was "worthless," but who could not resist using it in the service of his "Whig" ideology (p. 62). (In fact, the Saint Andrews chronicle is now known to have existed and, further, to have been very influential in the writing of Scottish history in the later medieval period). Union with England in no way diminished the Scots' gullibility; it simply offered it new avenues of expression. The Scots bought lock, stock, and barrel into the entire corpus of Ossianic poetry largely because, Trevor-Roper explains with devastating simplicity, the Scots desperately wanted a literary figure whom they could hold up to the likes of

Milton and Shakespeare. As if his readers need reminding, he adds that in England no one of any literary standing was taken in. Macpherson and his "Highland mafia" were eventually thoroughly disgraced, but still the scales did not drop from Scottish eyes (p. 183, see also pp. 129, 132, 150). Thus, a generation after Culloden, the learned ranks of Scottish society were taken in once again when the Allen brothers, roguish would-be descendants of Bonnie Prince Charlie, offered their compatriots yet another fake manuscript, this one purporting to be a sixteenth-century account establishing the tartan as a costume once common to all early European cultures. Yet again, the best efforts of a skeptical English intelligentsia failed to dampen Scottish enthusiasm.

There is, in short, much in this book to enflame Scotophiles, not least Trevor-Roper's bald statement that the Celts' contribution to British history has been restricted to the realm of myth and fantasy, while that of the Anglo-Saxons and Anglo-Normans, thankfully, has been grounded in "political and intellectual initiative" (p. 191). In his capacity as editor of the essays, Cater is quick to point out that the great man's intent had been to explore in a putative introductory chapter the reasons for the mythopoecism of the Scottish people. He explains, moreover, that in the later 1970s, Trevor-Roper's principled opposition to the possibility of Scottish devolution lay at the heart of his scholarly efforts to debunk "a fraudulent romance version of the country's history" (p. xii). A deeply held conviction in the benefits of union with England, he continues, provoked in Trevor-Roper a mistrust of these romantic nationalists' attempts to recreate "the image of the past in order to suit their present purposes," and a determination to set the record straight once and for all (p. xiii). Cater does not dwell at length on Trevor-Roper's decision to abandon this worthy crusade soon after 1980. Margaret Thatcher's government, it is true, suspended discussions of Scottish devolution. But as we all know, the matter did not lie dormant for long. More tellingly, the 1980s witnessed the first fruits, at the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, of a vigorous new generation of Scottish historians whose work was as critically sharp, theoretically sound, and intellectually well informed as that being produced anywhere in Great Britain. Perhaps like Humphrey Lhuyd, Horace Walpole, James Boswell, and Samuel Johnson before him, critics all of Scottish credulity and foolishness, the newly ennobled Lord Dacre found the role of unsung prophet of cultural propriety more of a challenge than it had once been.

Note

[1]. This review is based on uncorrected proofs.

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