



**Alex Woolf.** *From Pictland to Alba: Scotland, 789-1070.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. xv + 384 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7486-1233-8.



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This book, *From Pictland to Alba* by Alex Woolf, is the second volume in the New Edinburgh History of Scotland series that will comprise ten volumes in total. This new set of volumes is intended to supersede the previous four-volume Edinburgh History of Scotland series that was published in the 1970s. The fact that it now will take ten volumes to cover the totality of Scottish history where four once sufficed is a measure of the explosion of research and interest in the subject at all levels. As we might expect of Edinburgh University Press, the book is attractively packaged and the paperback edition has been kept within the price range of students.

The book consists of seven chronological chapters, sandwiched at either end by a methodological introduction and a concluding chapter that evaluates the themes of continuity and change across the entire period. Given the complexity of the subject matter under discussion, and let us be clear right from the outset that this must have been a difficult book to write, this

chronological approach was undoubtedly the best way to tackle the topic. In addition, within each chapter, the author has done a superb job of laying out the primary source material so the reader can follow each argument as he constructs it. The book is also easy to use, mainly because Woolf has included small discussions on languages and pronunciation, a chronological table of events, a guide to further reading, and short discussions of the principal medieval chronicles utilized. Readers will find the bibliography extensive and the index very useful.

The author was charged with writing a political history of the kingdoms in North Britain between 789 and 1070. He has done this with aplomb and displayed a breadth of knowledge and understanding that would be hard to match. It is, however, a little disappointing that a generally more rounded discussion of the subject was not produced. Though political history is important, it is equally crucial to understand how kingdoms were constructed, the building blocks of land that

underpinned them, and how services were exacted, both in terms of personal and military service. I cannot help but feel that Woolf might have gained some further insights by reading, for example, Christoph Sonneckner and Verena Winwarther's writings on the inner workings of the Carolingian Empire and the *mansus*.<sup>[1]</sup> In terms of environmental history, it is also disappointing that the author has not made use of paleo-environmental work by the likes of Richard Tipping and Althea Davies to produce a more accurate description of the landscape of North Britain rather than repeating the age-old mythic stories about the majority of the hills and mountains being heavily wooded.<sup>[2]</sup> Personally, I blame Tacitus!

The key to understanding Woolf's political analysis across the entire spectrum of this book is his argument that both Pictland and Alba were divided into two kingdoms, north and south of "The Mounth" (as it is now called) that roughly runs diagonally south-west across Scotland from the vicinity of Stonehaven in Kincardineshire. We are asked to accept that "The Mounth" divided the kingdoms of the northern and southern Picts, that it later delineated the separate territories controlled by the two royal kindreds of Clann Áeda meic Cináeda and Clann Cústantín meic Cináeda, and that it later separated the two kingdoms of Alba and Moray. Such a belief is perfectly understandable since Bede tells us that the kingdoms of the northern and southern Picts were divided by a range of hills. However, while the author may be correct in assuming that Bede's hills were the same as "The Mounth," this is by no means certain; Woolf should have discussed other alternatives. "Mounth" is still a relatively common place-name in Scotland, and there are many more historically attested examples of this place-name in other parts of the country.

In effect, the author has set up a hypothesis for the political development of Alba, but if there is a prospect of this falling at the first hurdle then both of his other linked theories--that both the

kingdom of Fortriu and the lands controlled by Clann Áeda meic Cináeda were the effective equivalent of Moray--may also be flawed. What perhaps does most damage to this scenario is his use of evidence from the Irish Annals to prove that important men from Fortriu/Moray were, or at least had a strong claim to be, recognized as kings of half of Alba. By Woolf's count, there were two occasions in the Annals of Ulster and Tigernach when such men were given the epithet "*rí Alban*" during the reign of King Máel Coluim mac Cináeda (Malcolm II, 1005-34).<sup>[3]</sup> According to him, this indicates that the kingdom of Alba was divided into two separate parts and only reunited under the kingship of King MacBethad mac Findlaích after 1040.

Let us look at this evidence more closely. The first of the two occasions when men from Fortriu/Moray were called "Kings of Alba" occurs in the Annals of Ulster under the year-date 1020.6, but this should surely be discounted as wholly reliable evidence since it was added to the annals by a sixteenth-century (or later) scribe, Hand H1, as a marginal interpolation.<sup>[4]</sup> This leaves a single entry in the Annals of Tigernach as possibly the only contemporary entry in which a Moravian was given this title. Unfortunately, the accuracy of this latter entry must also be questioned, partly because Tigernach has not yet been edited to modern standards and partly because it is generally agreed to reflect contemporary usage less accurately than the Annals of Ulster.

There are also occasions in this book where the author tries too hard to be controversial. This is perhaps most evident in his discussion of the office of *mormaer*, where he attempts to land the reddest of red herrings. As Woolf points out, hitherto the accepted definition of this word (thanks to the arguments advanced by Kenneth H. Jackson) has been "great-steward."<sup>[5]</sup> Woolf then accuses Jackson of "etymological fallacy," because he allowed himself to believe that a word's original meaning controlled its subsequent use, and

proceeds to reactivate an older theory that *mor-maer* actually meant sea-steward (pp 342-344). However, to find some support for this suggestion, Woolf has to rely on the pronunciation of the equivalent Modern Scottish Gaelic word, *morair*. Surely this makes him guilty of “reverse-etymological fallacy.” There are also some editing problems. For example, readers will search their local bookshops in vain for an item in the bibliography written by Richard Oram, entitled *Domination and Conquest: Scotland c.1070 to c.1230*, allegedly published in 2007, since that book has not yet been completed, never mind printed. There are also a number of annoying grammatical errors that occasionally creep in, like the penultimate sentence on page 224, which is missing a verb, or “highland” alternating with “Highland.”

It is widely recognized that the primary source material relating to this period of “Scottish” history is both sparse and frequently conflicting. Accordingly, any attempt to produce a historical synthesis from these sources will almost inevitably be open to alternate suggestions and analyses. It is to Woolf's credit that he has managed to produce such a well-written account that effectively tackles a far wider frame of reference than any of his predecessors ever accomplished (or were willing to engage with), and it is the totality of his discussion that is so impressive. This book deserves to become a recommended text.

#### Notes

[1]. Verena Winiwarter and Christoph Sonnlechner, *Der soziale Metabolismus der vorindustriellen Landwirtschaft in Europa* (Stuttgart:Breuninger-Stiftung, 2001); and Christoph Sonnlechner, “The Establishment of New Units of Production in Carolingian Times: Making Early Medieval Sources Relevant for Environmental History,” *Viator* 35 (2004): 21-37.

[2]. Richard Tipping, “The Fate and Form of Scotland's Woodlands,” *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 124 (1994): 1-54; and

Richard Tipping, Althea Davies, and Eileen Tisdall, “Long-Term Woodland Dynamics in West Glen Affric, Northern Scotland,” *Forestry* 79 (2006): 351-359.

[3]. S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill, eds., *The Annals of Ulster (To AD 1131)* (Dublin, 1983), 1020.6; and Whitley Stokes, trans., *The Annals of Tigernach*, 2 vols. (facsimile edition, Felinfach, 1993), 1029.

[4]. *Annals of Ulster*, 1020.6, note f, viii-ix.

[5]. Kenneth H. Jackson, *The Gaelic Notes in the Book of Deer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 102-110.

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