

Rosalind Mitchison — *A History of Scotland*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 1995.
Pp. x, 472.

The reissue of Rosalind Mitchison's lively one-volume *A History of Scotland* is to be welcomed, although it would be fairer to potential readers if the publisher had made it clear on the cover that this is a reprint of the 1982 edition. The only change is the addition of one book to the suggested readings. This is a shame, as the 1980s and 1990s have seen a flourishing of Scottish history, and an updated bibliography would prove a useful tool for those readers inspired to read further works on Scotland.

Despite this, the book has worn very well. As Mitchison says, "in its own way this is a historical document, to be viewed in the light of changing events" (p. ix). While it obviously does not deal in depth with some of the historiographical issues which have engaged historians in the last 15 years, for example, the relative power of the monarchy and nobility, it foreshadows many of the debates which were to come. Among these are the development of "national identity" as a result of the Wars of Independence (a theme since pursued by Alexander Grant), a reconsideration of the legends about James III foreshadowing Norman MacDougall's reassessment of the reign, and the need for historians to pay more attention to the witch hunt, although more recent studies might question the amount of responsibility Mitchison assigns to James VI for the witch trials.

Part of the book's enduring attractiveness, which should ensure its continued success with the general reader, is its lively style. Memorable phrases and descriptions abound. In discussing the eleventh century, Mitchison comments, "With Malcolm II the Scottish kingship begins to emerge from the mists of historic darkness, to be almost at once covered by the fog of literary invention" (p. 13). She sums up the career of a seventeenth-century nobleman by stating that "Hamilton was to show throughout his life a touch that turned all to mud" (p. 180).

The text is largely unreferenced, but, for the reader who looks at the footnotes, more treats are in store. "The French were appalled at the amount the Scots ate: international cooperation often produces this reaction" (p. 58). One footnote which the author might have omitted in a revision is a comment about Mary Queen of Scots, described in the text as "undersexed". The footnote explains that "it has been pointed out that any woman with a normal enjoyment of sex can keep a marriage going for six months: yet both of Mary's adult marriages were visibly on the rocks well within that time" (p. 127).

The book opens, in common with many Scottish histories, with an evocation of the landscape of the country. The medieval period receives thorough attention with a clear discussion of the development of "European" institutions such as towns, castles, new monastic orders, and feudal landholding. The main emphasis, however, is on the area of the author's own research, the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Mitchison sees the seventeenth century as "the key period for the understanding of modern Scotland" (p. ix) and devotes over a third of the book to the period between 1603 and 1707. Not all historians might agree with this emphasis, but Mitchison does an excellent job in untangling the complicated political and religious events of this turbulent time.

This section is in many ways the most original. For example, Mitchison attempts

to defend the new liturgy of 1637, which most historians have dismissed as totally objectionable to the people of the day. Indeed, the author seems determined to undermine many of the myths which have survived in the popular history of the period. "Scottish historiography of this era and later cannot be properly understood without the realization that a vast amount of nonsense has been talked about this short and disturbed period" (p. 269). She points out that much of the history has been based on hearsay evidence used by Robert Wodrow and suggests that the term "killing time", much loved by religious propagandists constructing the tale of persecuted Covenanters, would be more appropriately used for the rise in witch-hunting after the Restoration.

The book is especially good in putting Scottish events into the wider European context. The impact of warfare on governments, relationships between monarch and nobility, dynastic unions bringing two countries under one crown, and civil and religious wars typical of the "seventeenth-century crisis" are all used to shed light on Scotland's history. As Mitchison points out, past historians often "looked at Scottish history with eyes accustomed to English, and searched for parallels between the primitive administration of Scotland and the most advanced bureaucracy of the day, ignoring the rest of Europe" (pp. 71–72). One area of comparison which could be further explored is the Celtic world — the role of the Irish wars of the Bruces in the fourteenth century is not mentioned, for example. However, more attention is paid to the Gaelic-speaking world in the seventeenth century.

Mitchison's expertise in economic history allows her to give more weight to economic and social issues than many general Scottish histories have done. She points out that economic stability was an important factor in the making of the Scottish Enlightenment, and she attempts to take a balanced approach in her treatment of the Clearances, looking at economic as well as political factors. It would have been good to see a similar approach to the twentieth century, the one period that receives very little attention; the reader wanting to know more will need to turn to other historians.

For this reviewer, writing in the immediate aftermath of the September 1997 referendum which overwhelmingly endorsed a devolved Scottish parliament, one of the most interesting parts of the work as a "historical document" is the "Political Epilogue" with which it concludes. Writing after the failure of devolution proposals in 1979, the author discusses the problems which could result if political independence were achieved. Scotland's geography, unbalanced industrial pattern, divisions between Highlands and Lowlands, and uneven distribution of population and wealth all militate against successful independence. The amount of common British culture shared by Scotland with the rest of the United Kingdom also argues against the desirability of independence. On the other hand, flaws in the current legal system, the great power residing in the Westminster-appointed Secretary of State for Scotland, and other problems with the *status quo* suggest to the author that some form of "reconstruction of the relationship between the two parts of the United Kingdom and a reaffirmation of the national identity of Scotland, might give something of value to the world at large" (p. 426). Prophetically, she suggests that the 1979 loss would not be the end of the idea of Scottish devolution.

Examining the relationship of culture and political independence, Mitchison argues that few countries have shown a “simple relationship between independence and creativity” (p. 426). Indeed, in the 1980s and 1990s in the aftermath of the political defeat, there has been a great flowering of Scottish culture, music, art, and writing, both historical and literary. It will be interesting to see what the future, with its promise of greater political autonomy, will bring.

Elizabeth Ewan
University of Guelph

Sandra Den Otter — *British Idealism and Social Explanation: A Study in Late Victorian Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. Pp. x, 250.

This book quite usefully explores the intersection between late nineteenth-century British idealism and late nineteenth-century social explanation. Building on recent scholarship which has identified British idealism as an important part of late Victorian political culture, Den Otter successfully analyzes the complex relationship between idealism and movements of thought often seen as more influential throughout the nineteenth century, such as utilitarianism, empiricism, and evolutionism. Den Otter has immersed herself in the intricate and sometimes convoluted ideas of British idealists, and she has given her readers a detailed picture of their metaphysical and social thought. At times, however, the author’s fascination with her figures has led her to overemphasize their impact on the Victorian mind.

Den Otter begins in her introduction with an overview of the British idealist tradition in the nineteenth century. Though not a school with a uniform body of doctrine, the idealists were united in seeking alternatives to the atomism of contemporary British philosophy. They agreed on general philosophical principles, on the nature of perception, and on the unity underlying the seemingly discrete parts of human experience. They also shared similar thoughts on social and political notions concerning the primacy of community, the moral qualities of the state, and various concepts of self-development with affinities to liberal ideals. Den Otter discusses the first architects of idealism, T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, and Edward Caird, and then introduces the younger or second generation of idealists, including Henry Jones, John Watson, William Wallace, J. S. Mackenzie, David George Ritchie, and Bernard Bosanquet. Throughout the book the author spends the most time on Ritchie and Bosanquet.

The first chapter, “Plotting the Idealist Inheritance”, is devoted to an examination of the relationship between German and British idealism. Den Otter’s main aim here is to place British idealism solidly in its native environment. Though the British idealists found in Kant and Hegel a compelling alternative to atomism, they tried to distance themselves from German philosophy since their countrymen often viewed it as incoherent, absurd, and at times dangerous. Even at Oxford, the reputed centre of British idealism, German metaphysics was “filtered through the prisms of classical and British empirical traditions” (p. 44). Den Otter’s point is that